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MARK TIDD MANUFACTURER

CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND

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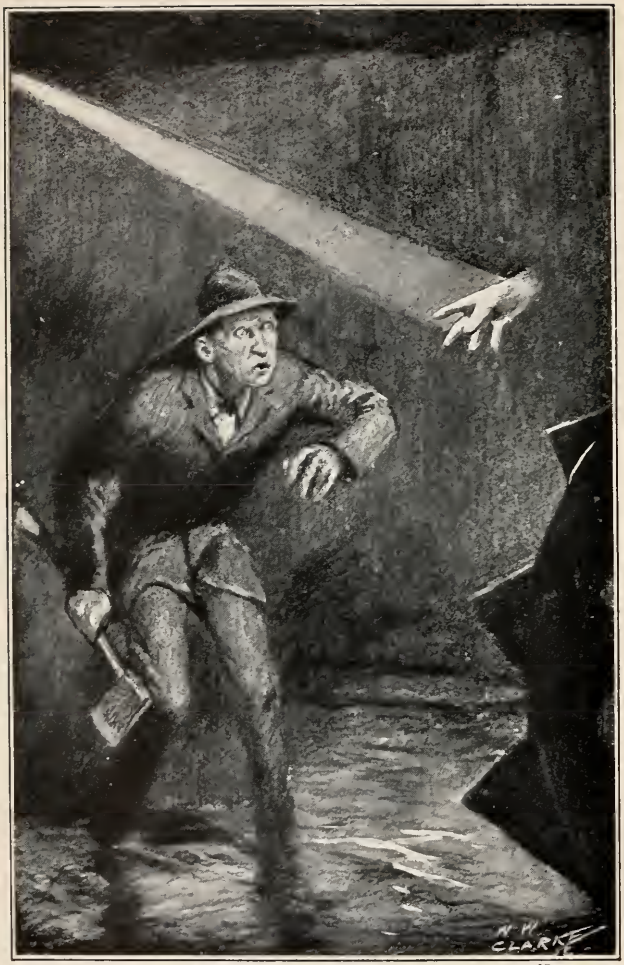

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THE HAND CAME CLOSER AND CLOSER

MARK TIDD MANUFACTURER

BY

CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND

AUTHOR OF

"MARK TIDD" "MARK TIDD IN THE BACKWOODS"

"MARK TIDD'S CITADEL" "MARK TIDD, EDITOR" ETC.

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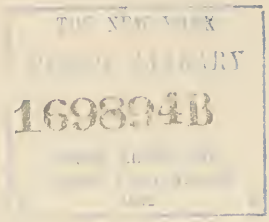

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MARK TIDD, MANUFACTURER

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CHAPTER I

BINNEY JENKS, Tallow Martin, and I were sitting on Mark Tidd's front porch, waiting for him to get through supper. Maybe you've got an idea that didn't take any patience, but you want to change your mind pretty quick. Eating supper wasn't any two-second job with Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd. You can bet it wasn't. He didn't just grab a bite and run like us fellows do, but he sat down to the table with his stummick about six inches away from the edge of it, and kept on eating till he touched.

He knew we were waiting for him, but that didn't make a bit of difference. If General Grant and the Emperor Napoleon were hanging around waiting for him to come out and play tag with them, he'd have eaten just as much and not a mite faster. When you weigh as much as

he does I calc'late it takes more to keep you going, just like it takes more wood to run a big stove than it does a little one. It didn't take him much more than an hour to get his stummick filled up this time, and out he waddled, looking kind of pleased and peaceful, with his hand resting gentle on his belt.

"Um! . . ." says he.

"Hope you didn't hustle out before you got plenty," says I.

He looked at me out of his little eyes that had to sort of peer over the tops of his dumpling cheeks. "Plunk," says he, "if you d-d-do everythin' in your l-life as thorough as I eat, folks is goin' to admire you consid'able. I started in with vegetable soup at six o'clock, and I don't recall neglectin' a dish from that to apple pie. Two pieces of apple pie," says he.

"It's lucky," says Binney, "that your pa's rich. If he wasn't he couldn't afford to keep you. A poor fam'ly would have to drown you in a pail of water like folks does kittens they can't figger to take care of."

"Take a kind of big pail of water," said Tallow. "Guess they'd need the village standpipe."

"How's your pa and ma?" says I.

"Oh," says Mark, "Ma she's b-b-busy, as usual. Just a-hustlin' from git-up to go-to bed. Claims she's p-plumb tired out, but the

tireder she gets the harder she works. She just sent Dad out to put over the kittle while she cleared the table."

"Did he do it?" says I.

Mark grinned. "When I l-looked through the kitchen door," says he, "Dad he'd gone and set the dust-pan careful on the stove, and was settin' in front of the stove, a-holdin' the kittle in his lap and restin' a volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* on top of it. You could 'a' hollered fire and he wouldn't budge."

That was Mr. Tidd all over. He was one of these inventor folks, and that dreamy and absent-minded you wouldn't believe it. Always a-thinking about something besides what he ought to be thinking about, and always getting into trouble with Mrs. Tidd—and forever reading the *Decline and Fall*. There's eight volumes of it, and I'll bet he can recite it word for word. Yes, sir, if Mrs. Tidd was to send him to the store for a pound of tea, as like as not he would come home bringin' a knife-sharpener or a box of cough-drops or a sick dog. Mrs. Tidd always figgered on sendin' him at least twice for anything—and then, 'most generally, she had to send one of us boys to git it, after all. And he was rich. Made so much money out of inventin' a turbine engine that he's got a bank full of it. But you'd never think it. Why, him and Mrs. Tidd lives just like they did when he

didn't have two dollars to his name. He dresses just the same, and she won't even keep a hired girl. Fine folks, I can tell you, and us fellows think a heap of them.

"Well," says Mark, "what 'll we d-do this evenin'?"

Before anybody could answer a man came through the gate and sort of shuffled up the walk toward the porch. He was nigh seven foot high and he wore enough whiskers to stop a mattress—the kind of whiskers that grow out every which way and waves around frantic when the wind blows. They made his head look as if it was about as big around as a bushel basket—but from there down you couldn't hardly see him at all. He had a sort of look like a pumpkin lantern bein' carried on the end of a long pole.

"Here's Silas Doolittle Bugg," says I.

We didn't say anything till he got up to the steps. Then, all of a sudden, he seemed to see us and stopped and reached for a handful of them whiskers. Sort of gathered together all he could in one grab and jerked 'em like he aimed to haul 'em out by the roots.

"Howdy!" says he.

"Howdy!" says we.

He kind of leaned over like he was breaking in two in the middle and pointed a finger nigh six inches long right in Mark's face. "You're

the Tidd boy," he says, in a voice like shooting off a giant firecracker. He didn't speak; he *exploded!*

There wasn't any use in Mark's trying to deny it. Nobody would have believed him, so he says he *was* the Tidd boy.

"Pa home?" says Silas.

"Yes, sir," says Mark.

"I come to see him," says Silas, exploding it again. But then the queerest thing happened to his voice. It sort of faded away. It got littler and littler. "But," he says, turning around on his heels, "I don't calc'late I'll wait. I guess I'll be goin'. Somehow it don't seem 's though I needed to see him to amount to anythin'. I guess maybe he druther not see me. . . . Say, young feller, how's he feelin' to-night? Savage or jest so-so?"

"I don't call to m-m-mind a time when Dad was s-savage," says Mark.

"You figger I better see him, then," says Silas.

"I don't f-figger he'll harm you none."

Silas gives out a big sigh that came all the way from his shoes. "I'm plumb scairt," says he.

"I'll call him," says Mark.

"No. No. Whoa there, boy. Hold on a minnit. Lemme git ready first. Seems like I got to brace myself for this meetin'. Sure he's feelin' mild and gentle?"

"As a lamb," says Mark.

"Wisht I could git a peek at him before I tackle him," says Silas.

"Just walk around and look through the kitchen window," says Mark.

Silas stood still a minute, and then he tiptoed around the house, and we saw him put his nose against the window and stand there, staring in. In a couple of jiffies he was back again.

"Looks stern and kind of war-like," he says.

"Dad never bit nobody," says Mark.

"You calc'late it's safe for me to see him?"

"Course," says Mark.

"Well," says Silas, letting off another of those big sighs, "I guess it's got to be did. Hain't no way of puttin' it off; but, gosh! how I dread it!"

Mark got up and went in to call his father. In a minute he was back with Mr. Tidd, who had his thumb in the *Decline and Fall* and was blinking peaceful and looking as gentle and serene as a ten-year-old rabbit-hound. When Silas saw him coming he was like to have taken to his heels, and he fidgeted and moved from one foot to the other and twisted his fingers like he was trying to braid them, and breathed hard. You would have thought he was going to run into a tribe of massacreeing Injuns.

Mr. Tidd stood on the top step and peered down at Silas with those mild eyes of his, and nodded, and says, "It's Silas, hain't it?"

"Yes," says Silas, with all the explosion gone out of his voice. "How you feelin', Mr. Tidd? Be you patient and long-sufferin' to-night, or be you kind of riled about somethin'? 'Cause if you be I kin come back to-morrow."

"I calc'late I feel perty peaceful, Silas. Wouldn't you say I was feelin' peaceful, Marcus Aurelius?"

"I'd call you so," says Mark.

"You'll need to be," says Silas, "when I break it to you."

"Oh," says Mr. Tidd, kind of vague, "you got somethin' to break to me?"

"You ought to know what," says Silas.

Mr. Tidd waggled his head and opened his book and shut it again, and scratched his leg. "Calc'late somebody must be sick," says he.

"'Tain't that," says Silas.

"I hain't much good at guessin', Silas. . . . Say, Silas, set a minute and listen to this here passage out of Gibbon. I was just a-readin' it over. You'll find it jam full of pleasure and profit." He leaned against a post and opened up the book, but Silas spoke up, anxious-like, and says:

"I don't calc'late I got any heart to listen to readin', Mr. Tidd, and neither will you have when I git around to breakin' it to you."

"No?" says Mr. Tidd. "Well, then, Silas,

admittin' you got somethin' to break, why don't you up and break it?"

"Seems like I hain't got the courage. I was hopin' maybe you'd guess."

"I'm willin' to try," says Mr. Tidd, in that gentle voice of his. "I'll guess maybe the house is on fire."

"What house?" says Silas, sort of taken by surprise.

"Why," says Mr. Tidd, as mild as could be, "*this* house."

Silas looked up at the roof and craned his neck to peer around to the side. "*This* house," says he, all flabbergasted. "Say, if you think this house is on fire, why hain't you doin' somethin' about it?"

"Well," said Mr. Tidd, "what would you advise doin'?"

"Yellin'," says Silas.

"I hain't much on yellin'," says Mr. Tidd.

"If my house was on fire I'd calc'late to make *some* racket," says Silas.

"But I don't *know* this house is on fire. I jest guessed it was."

"Hain't you goin' to find out?"

"Why," says Mr. Tidd, "if it's on fire we'll find out quick enough, won't we?"

Maybe you think Mr. Tidd was joking with Silas Doolittle Bugg, but he wasn't. That was his way. He'd have acted just that way if the

house really was on fire, and probably he'd have stopped the fire company on the lawn to read to them out of the *Decline and Fall* if the roof was blazing.

"Well, I swan!" says Silas.

"Hain't that what you wanted to break to me, Silas?" Mr. Tidd says.

"No," says Silas; "it was somethin' else."

"Oh!" says Mr. Tidd. "Want me to guess ag'in?"

"'Twouldn't do no good," says Silas, drooping with discouragement. "You wouldn't guess right."

"Maybe so," says Mr. Tidd.

"It's about *me*," says Silas.

"You?" says Mr. Tidd.

"Me and *you*."

"Oh, you and me? I want to know!"

"Don't you remember?" says Silas.

"I hain't certain," says Mr. Tidd, scratching his leg again. "Don't seem to remember anythin'."

"Money," says Silas.

"Oh, money?" Mr. Tidd says, as vague as a cloud of fog.

"Lots of money," says Silas.

"Do tell," says Mr. Tidd.

"And my mill."

"Oh," says Mr. Tidd. "It's your mill that's on fire?"

"My mill hain't afire. Nothin's afire. You hain't standin' there tellin' me you plumb clean forgot?"

"I hain't forgot exactly, Silas, but it don't seem like I remember clear. You might sort of give me a hint."

"Promissory note," says Silas.

"Promissory note, eh? What about it, Silas? Um! . . . I've heard of promissory notes. Gibbon he don't mention 'em, but I've heard tell of 'em somewheres. Now where was it? Lemme see. . . . Promissory note. . . ."

"I give you one."

"Much obleeged," says Mr. Tidd. "What 'll I do with it?"

"Say, you look here, Mr. Tidd. A promissory note means I promise to pay you money."

"To be sure," says Mr. Tidd. "It's kind of you. But I don't calc'late to need money."

"That's it," says Silas. "You hain't goin' to git none."

"No?" says Mr. Tidd. "Hain't I?"

"Not a penny," says Silas. "Not that I owe you."

"Well. . . . Well. . . ." said Mr. Tidd.

"You lent me money when I needed it to start up my mill," said Silas.

"So I did," says Mr. Tidd. "Seems like I remember somethin' about it. You was goin'

to pay it back or somethin'. That was it, wasn't it?"

"That's the idee," says Silas, "and that's what I come to break to you. I was mighty nervous about comin', but it had to be did. I jest can't pay that money, Mr. Tidd. I'm plumb *busted.* The mill's plumb busted. I can't make no money out of her, and so I can't pay you none. I come to tell you all you kin do is to take the mill."

"I don't want no mills," said Mr. Tidd.

"You got to take it," says Silas.

"I got to?"

"Sure as shootin'. It was your security, wasn't it?"

"*Was* it?" says Mr. Tidd. "Well, I swan to man!"

"So," says Silas, "I come to tell you and to turn that there property over to you. It's the best I kin do. I calc'late to be honest, but somehow I can't figger to make money. I kin *lose* money. You hain't no idee how skilful I be at losin' money. . . . The mill's yourn, and that's all there is to it."

"Well, hain't that the beatin'est!" says Mr. Tidd. "Me ownin' a mill! Whatever 'll I do with a mill, Silas?"

"I dunno. Run it, maybe. Sell it, maybe."

Mark Tidd he got up slow, his eyes puckered and looking as bright as buttons. "Say, pa,"

says he, "invite Mr. Bugg to set. I got an idee."

"He's always gettin' idees," said Mr. Tidd to Silas. "What's the idee this time, Marcus Aurelius?"

"Why," says Mark, "it l-looks like Mr. Bugg was busted!"

"I be," says Silas.

"Because," says Mark, "he hain't a b-b-business man."

"Right," says Silas. "Right as could be. I kin work, but I can't figger."

"I kin f-f-figger," says Mark. "Here's my notion. Mr. Bugg owes you m-money he can't pay. Well, there's the mill, and mills is built to m-make money with. Money kin be made with this m-m-mill."

"Maybe," says Silas.

"Course it can," says Mark. "Now, vacation's here, and we hain't got nothin' to do. You take over Mr. Bugg's mill, Dad, and the boys and me will run it. Git the idee? We'll make money out of it and pay you back, and then, when we git her to goin' and makin' lots of money, we'll turn her back to Silas ag'in. Kind of receivers, like they have when folks go bankrupt. How's that, Dad?"

"Don't see no harm in it," said Mr. Tidd.

"How about you, Mr. Bugg?"

"Anythin' suits *me*," says Silas.

"You'll keep on workin'," says Mark, "and helpin' to look after the manufacturin'. We'll look after the b-business end, and help with the m-m-manufacturin' end, too. Eh? How's that?"

"First class," says Silas.

"We'll start in to-morrow," says Mark. "You fellows be on hand. Whistle she b-blows at seven. We'll git down and f-f-figger things out and then we'll start to work. We hain't never run a mill," he says, all enthusiastic and worked up.

"No," says I, "we hain't, nor a circus, nor a airyplane, nor a merry-go-round."

"But we kin," says he.

That was Mark Tidd all over. We kin, he says, and that was what he meant. Folks did run mills and make money, and if they could, why, he could, too. He was that confident in himself that he made you confident in him, too. And another thing, when he started in on a job he'd stick to it. Nothing would discourage him, and if there was any way of pulling it off he would do it, and you could bet your last dollar on it.

"All right," says he, "*that's* s-s-settled. We'll see you at s-s-seven, Mr. Bugg."

"Well," said Silas, slow and kind of groping around in his mind, "if this don't beat all! It *does* beat all. Sufferin' codfish! I swan to man!"

He turned around quick and began to shuffle off, muttering to himself and grabbing handfuls of his whiskers. The last we saw of him he had both his hands grabbed into them and he was pulling like all-git-out. Those whiskers must have been rooted in tight.

"Better git to bed," says Mark. "To-morrow's goin' to be a b-b-busy day."

CHAPTER II

WE were all down at the mill before seven o'clock. It wasn't much of a mill, but when I stood there looking at it, and figuring that I was going to help run it, why, it looked bigger than the Capitol at Washington, and pretty gorgeous, too. Somehow the feeling that you're interested in a thing always makes it look bigger and better. I guess that's why a boy always gets the notion that his dog is better than anybody else's dog, no matter what kind of a dog it really is. I was downright *proud* of that mill, and I could tell by the way Mark Tidd stood and looked at it, with his head cocked on one side, that he was proud of it, too.

It was all painted red, and was right on the edge of the river, with a mill-race running underneath it. It didn't run with an engine, but with water-power, and the power came from a dam that ran across the river. I didn't think much about that dam just then, nor about water-power, but before we got through with things I did a heap of thinking about them, and so did Mark Tidd. Up till then a river didn't

mean anything to me but a thing to fish in or swim in, but before I was many months older I discovered that rivers weren't invented just for kids to monkey with, nor yet to make a home for fish. They have business, just like anybody else, and they're valuable just like any other business, getting more valuable the more business they can do.

We went into the mill. The floor was all littered up with sawdust, and chunks of wood, and machinery, and belts, and saws, and holes in the floor. It seemed like there was almost as much hole as there was floor, and you had to pick your way or down you'd go. I didn't know much about machinery nor what the machines were for, but Mark, he'd hung around there some, and he knew. He was one of them kind that's always finding out. Always asking questions and bothering folks for no reason but that he's got an itch to know things and has to be scratching it constant. I'll admit it pays sometimes. You never know when a mess of information is coming in handy.

"L-let's see," says Mark, "you got two back-knife lathes and three novelty lathes."

"Yep," says Silas Doolittle Bugg, exploding his voice like a blast of dynamite.

"And a planer, and a swing-off saw, and a circular-saw mill."

"Yep," says Silas.

"What's t-t-that thing?" says Mark, pointing off into a corner where a dusty, rusty, busted-up looking thing was setting.

"Dowel-machine," says Silas. "Bought her to an auction. Never knowed jest why. Fetched her back and stuck her there, and she hain't been moved since."

"What's dowels?" says I.

"Little pegs like," says Silas.

"Um! . . ." says Mark. "What you been makin' m-most?"

"Drumsticks," exploded Silas, "and dumbbells and tenpins and chair-rounds."

"Which made the most money for you?"

"You hain't askin' it right," said Silas. "What you want to say is which lost the most money for me?"

"All right," says Mark. "Which?"

"I dunno," says Silas, grabbing into his beard and yanking it off to one side.

"Let's go into the office," says Mark.

"Never calc'lated to have much office," says Silas. "That there room was built for one, but seems like I never had no need for it. I jest wandered around."

"Oh!" says Mark. "Who kept the books?"

"Books?" says Silas. "Oh yes, books. To be sure—books."

"Yes, ledgers and journals and such like."

"Never had one."

"How ever did you manage to git along?"

"Hain't I been a-tellin' you I didn't git along? I busted."

"But how did you run without books?"

"Why," says Silas, "if I owed a feller he sent me a bill, and if I had any money I paid him. If a feller owed me I calc'lated he'd pay me some day, if he was honest, and I kep' sort of track of that on these here pieces of wood. Whenever I sold a man an order I put it down here, and if he didn't pay after a while I guessed maybe he didn't figger to pay, so I chucked the hunk of board over into the office room. There's quite some boards in there."

"Didn't you send out invoices?"

"Invoices? Didn't calc'late to. Used to set down and write a letter once in a while askin' for money."

"I'm s'prised," says Mark, his voice not getting a bit sarcastic, but his eyes looking that way considerable — "I'm s'prised you went busted."

"I hain't," says Silas. "I always went busted. Seems like goin' busted was a habit of mine."

"Have any cost system?"

"What's one of them?" says Silas, looking around bewildered—like as if he expected one to come up and lick his hand. "Never seen one around here!"

"A cost system is the way you find out how much it costs you to manufacture—how much it c-c-costs to make a hundred d-drumsticks or a h-hundred dumb-bells and sich. Didn't you know that?"

"Course not," said Silas. "What's the difference, anyhow?"

"How could you f-f-figger your sellin' prices?"

"Mostly I took what was offered."

"Um! . . ." says Mark, and for a minute he looked clean discouraged.

"What did your l-l-logs cost you?"

"I figgered to pay twelve dollars a thousand."

"How much did it cost to h-h-handle 'em?"

"How should I know?"

Mark waggled his head like he didn't feel very comfortable inside of it. "Course you don't know what the l-labor cost on each article?"

"Now you look here, Mark Tidd, I hain't no 'cyclopedy. How ever you think I was goin' to know them things?"

"Know how many drumsticks you got out of a thousand f-foot of timber?"

"Never counted."

"Near as I can g-gather," says Mark, "the main thing you know about this b-b-business is that it's busted."

"Calc'late you're right," says Silas.

"Men work by the piece or by the d-day?"

"Some of both," says Silas.

It looked pretty close to hopeless. I didn't understand exactly what Mark was getting at all the time, but I sensed some of it, and it looked to me like we was grabbing holt of about as big a muddle as anybody ever saw.

"Could we start up this mill to-morrow?" Mark asked.

"Calc'late we could—if we could git the help and if nothin' else didn't prevent."

"Have you got l-logs?"

Silas pointed out of the window to the log-yard, and anybody could see he did have logs, quite a consid'able stack of them.

"Paid for?" says Mark.

"Mostly," says Silas.

"Why didn't you turn 'em into m-m-money, then?"

"The faster I manufactured 'em the faster I went busted," says Silas, "so I jest up and quit."

"Who do you owe m-money to besides Pa?" Mark wanted to know.

"Not many. You see I kep' usin' the money I borrowed off him to pay other folks."

"That's a help, anyhow," Mark says. "How many logs do you use a d-day?"

"Some days more, some days less."

"Got any orders on h-hand? For drumsticks and dumb-bells and s-s-sich?"

"Not to speak of," says Silas.

"That's good, too," says Mark. "It lets us take a f-f-fresh start. Who you been sellin' to?"

Silas told him the names of several concerns, and Mark wrote them down in a little book.

"Now," says he to Silas, "you stir around and get a crew here to start up to-morrow. We're a-goin' to manufacture, and we *got* to manufacture before I kin do any f-f-figgerin'. Maybe there's experts could figger costs without startin' to manufacture, but I'm dummed if I kin. We'll run a week or so and then we'll start to f-f-figger."

"Jest as you say," Silas roared, like a boiler was busting, and out he went, grabbing at his whiskers and hanging on like they were some kind of a balloon that carried him through the air. The rest of his long, lank body kind of trailed behind like the tail of a kite.

"Now," says Mark, "l-let's start in."

"How?" says I.

"Gittin' ready. I studied some bookkeepin' in school this year, and I guess Clem Brush down to the bank will give me some p-pointers. I'll git him to help buy a set of books. I want you fellers should hustle around here and sort things over, and make a list of everything in the m-m-mill. And while you're doin' it you might clean up some. Never see sich a dirty

mill. Looks like Silas never cleaned any sawdust out of here from the day he started to run. As full of sawdust as an ice-house. Two of you go at that—Plunk and Binney. Tallow, you go to the office and see if you can't m-m-make it look more l-like an office and less like the place where a boiler exploded. . . . If you kin f-f-find a stock-room, take an inventory of it."

Off he went down-town, and we set to work with shovels and brooms and paper and pencils. Looks like a fellow gits more ease and quiet and comfort out of a lead-pencil than he does out of a shovel. Binney was willing to do all the listing if I'd do all the cleaning; and I was willing to wear my brain out with inventory if he'd crack his back shoveling sawdust. When we saw neither of us was going to give in, we made the best of it and divided up. Tallow didn't have anything to double up while he was working in the office; shovel up was his job, and we guyed him some.

I was cleaning up around the saw-carriage when I looked up and saw a man standing there, looking at me kind of surprised, like the sight of me actually at work was more 'n he could bear. I couldn't see why he should feel that way, because I never seen him before, and, anyhow, I wasn't any lazier 'n Tallow and Binney, though they hid it easier.

The man wore one of them stovepipe hats, and he had a cane, and there was a sparklish stone in his necktie, and he had things over his shoes that were kind of gray and had buttons on 'em—spats, Mark said they were. I calc'late he had on brand-new pants, because the crease wasn't wore out of them, and a kind of a perty vest, and one of them coats like the minister wears Sundays. He wasn't big, and he wasn't little. He wasn't what you'd call terrible old—maybe forty—and he wasn't fat or lean. Just one of them in-between sort of men. He wore a little stubby mustache that looked like he could take it off and use it for a tooth-brush if it was loose, and he had two eyes, one on each side of his nose. His nose wasn't much to speak of, just a reg'lar nose—the kind you can blow, but not very loud. That reminds me: did you ever hear Uncle Ike Bond blow his nose? Well, lemme tell you you missed something. When Uncle Ike hauls out that red bandana of his and grabs a-hold of his nose with it and lets her go, you'd think the train was whistling for a crossing. Wow! I've seen him scare horses so they 'most jumped out of their harness. Why, when Uncle Ike drove the bus to somebody's house he never got out to ring the bell—he just blowed his nose. Sometimes, if he was in a hurry, he blowed it when he was a block away, and the folks would be all out and ready, standing wait-

ing for him when he got there. Once there was a motion before the selectmen to hire Uncle Ike to be the fire department, so's they could use his nose for the fire whistle, but somehow it never went through.

This man here didn't blow his nose at all. He just stood there looking at me a minute, and then he picked his way over, taking a lot of pains not to get any dust onto his pants; and when he got clost he says:

"Where is the proprietor?"

"Of what?" says I.

"This mill," says he.

"Depends," says I, "on who you mean by proprietor. I'm dummed if I know jest who is holdin' down that job. There's things in favor of sev'ral folks. Now there's Silas Doolittle Bugg; some might claim *he* owns it. Then there's Mr. Tidd; some might say he was the feller. Then there's Mark Tidd; he comes in somewheres, but I'm blessed if I know just where."

"Where are they?"

"Different places," says I. "Was there anything I could do for you?"

"Answer questions so I'll know what you're talking about," says he.

Well, that made me mad. From that minute I took a dislike to the man, and I never got over it. I guess I wouldn't be letting go of any

secret if I was to say that the longer I knew him the less I liked him.

"Mister," says I, not smarty, but just firm and business-like, the way Mark says you should always be, "I'm one of the fellers that's runnin' this mill. If you got any business here you kin state it to me. If you hain't got any business here, why, I'm sort of busy dustin' off the furniture. Now, what kin I do for you?"

"I want to find the owner."

"I've explained about the owner."

"Who is in charge, then? Who is running this business?"

"Mark Tidd," says I.

"Well, I got something out of you at last," says he. "But it was like mining for it. Do you always keep what valuable information you have sunk as deep as this?"

"We make drumsticks and dumb-bells and tenpins and chair-rounds," says I. "Do you want to buy any?"

"No," says he.

"Be you a travelin'-man? What you got to sell?"

"I'm not a salesman," says he.

"What be you, then?" says I.

"Nothing that would interest you, young man. Where will I find this Mr. Tidd?"

"Mark Tidd?"

"Yes," says he.

"You'll find him here," says I, "pervidin' you wait long enough. This is about the only place I know of where he'll be. I calc'late to see him amblin' in perty soon."

"I'll wait," says he. "Where's the office?"

"If you'd call it an office," says I, "it's through that door."

He walked over and jerked open the door. One look inside give him a plentiful sufficiency. You couldn't see for dust and cobwebs and chunks and dirt that Tallow was stirring around like he was one of these whirlwinds. The air was plumb full of rubbish. I bet Tallow was having a bully time. The man shut the door quick and backed off.

"Is that the office?" says he.

"Sich as it is," said I.

"Where can I wait?" says he.

"Pick out a place yourself," says I.

He walked around disgusted-like, looking for a place to sit down, but he didn't seem to get suited. There wasn't a place that would have agreed with them pants of his. He didn't hanker to git dirt on 'em, and I wasn't dusting off anything for him just then.

I was sorry for him if he was tired, because he didn't have but two choices—to stand up or sit and git his new pants all grime. He stood.

In about half an hour in come Mark Tidd with his arms full of whopping-big books. He

dumped them on the saw-carriage and stood and panted, looking around.

"How's it c-c-comin'?" says he.

"Two in a hill," says I. "Got a visitor."

Mark looked at the man and then at me. "Who's he?"

"Dunno," says I, "and I hain't got no ache to find out."

"What's he w-want?"

"To see you," says I.

Mark walked over toward him and says, "Was you l-lookin' for me, mister?"

"I'm waiting for Mr. Tidd. Mr. Mark Tidd, I believe was the name."

"That's me."

"*You!* That boy told me Mark Tidd was in charge of this mill."

"He's f-f-famous for tellin' the truth," says Mark.

"But you're nothing but a kid."

"Uh-huh," says Mark, sort of squinting his eyes like he does sometimes when somebody says something he doesn't cotton to, "but I'm boss, just the same. What kin I d-d-do for you?"

"This is business," says the man. "I want to do business with somebody who *can* do business."

"You might t-try me," says Mark, as calm and gentle as a kitten. "I'm the best in that

line we got. If you got business to do with this m-m-mill, I calc'late you *got* to do it with me."

"Huh!" says the man.

"I'm p-p-perty busy," says Mark. "If you got somethin' you want to say you better git to the p-p-p'int."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Very well," said he; "I'll get to the point. I represent the Middle-West Power Company. We own water-powers all over this state and other states. We have one below on this river and a couple above. You have a small power here that doesn't amount to a great deal, but we'll be willing to take it off your hands. Your dam is going to pieces and will need expensive repairs. I take it you own this dam and site?"

"Yes."

"Well, we'll take it off your hands—at a figure."

"What figure?"

"I'm not prepared to say exactly, but if you like we can go into the matter thoroughly and then I'll make you an offer."

"Don't f-f-figger to sell," says Mark. "We need this p-power to run our mill."

"But we want to buy," said the man.

"Uh-huh," says Mark. "Well, if you want it bad, you kin have it. But you got to buy power *and* mill. Mill's no good without p-p-power, is it? I'll figger up what the whole

thing is worth to me, complete as it stands, and let you know."

"I'm not buying any mills, my friend. I guess you didn't understand me. I represent the Middle-West Power Company." He said it as a fellow might say he was the ambassador from England, or a special traveling-agent from the moon.

"I heard that," says Mark.

"Then you must have heard that when we want to buy—we buy."

Mark looked the man right in the eye for a minute and didn't say a word; then he asked, "What did you say your name was, mister?"

The man handed him a card.

"Amassa P. Wiggamore," says Mark. "Well, Mr. Amassa P. Wiggamore, maybe you never heard of me—like I've heard of your company—but I'll give you some news about me free of charge. When I sell I s-s-sell, and when I don't want to sell I don't sell, Power Company or no Power Company. I calc'late you was m-m-makin' some kind of a threat."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll sell you this outfit," says Mark, "for f-f-fifteen thousand dollars. That's my f-first offer and that's my l-last offer. You got a chance to take it or leave it."

Mr. Wiggamore laughed. "I'll leave it," said he. "Now look here, my young friend, we

want this power and we're going to have it. I'm willing to offer you a fair price, but if you don't accept it now you'll be mighty glad to accept a blame sight less before long."

Mark looked him in the eye a minute again and then stepped over to one side. "If you'll turn around, mister," says he, "and l-l-look where I'm pointin' you'll see a door. It leads outside. Jest take your Power Company in your hand and hike through it."

"Young man—" says Mr. Wiggamore, very pompous and impressive.

"That way out," says Mark, and walked away, leaving Mr. Wiggamore with his mouth all open and ready to speak—but with nobody to speak to. I guess he was an economical man, and not wasteful of words, because he shut his mouth again before any of them got out of it, and scowled a second, and then turned around quick and went out.

Mark came over to me and stopped. "Say, Plunk," says he, "don't it b-b-beat all? Every time we git into anythin' trouble's sure to t-t-turn up."

"Yes," says I, "and you're glad of it."

CHAPTER III

"FIRST thing we got to think of," says Mark, "is how we're g-g-goin' to git the money to p-pay off the men Saturday night."

"How much 'll it be?" says I.

"Depends on how many men Silas Doolittle hires. Looks to me like f-five or six men ought to run this mill. That would mean about a hunderd dollars."

"Huh!" says I. "Might as well make it a million. Where be we goin' to look for a hunderd dollars?"

"Wisht I knew," says Mark, "but we got to have it."

"Then we better git a wiggle on us."

"We'll w-w-wiggle all right," says he, "but we won't start till we see somethin' to wiggle about. Jest wigglin' won't git any money. Thing to do is to set and figger out some possible way, and then make it work."

"Good!" says I. "You set and figger and we'll go on cleanin' up the mill. I notice every time there's any hard work to do you got somethin' you have to set down and think about."

"Well," says he, "if I got any help thinkin' out of you I wouldn't have to stick to it so constant. You're a heap better cleaner, Plunk, than you be thinker. Somebody might pay you to clean, but the feller that paid you to think would be advertisin' for a r-r-room in the l-lunatic-asylum."

"Shucks!" says I, which was the best thing I could think of just at that minute. It wasn't such a good remark either, when you come to think of it. I might have figgered out something a heap sharper and more cutting if I'd been given time, but I wasn't. It's funny what smart retorts you can think of two or three days after you need them. But Mark always managed to think of them right off. Seemed like he had a bundle of them on hand ready to shoot off whenever he wanted one.

Well, we went ahead cleaning up that mill, and, to give Mark what credit is due, he came around and gave us some hints how to lift some of the heavier things. By night we'd made quite some difference in the looks of things.

"Anyhow," says Mark, "we got r-r-room to m-manufacture now, whether we ever git to m-manufacturin' or not. I hope Silas Doolittle gits enough men."

Along came Silas about four o'clock, looking sort of discouraged. He slumped down on the

saw-carriage and lopped his head like he was a wilted poppy, and let out a groan.

"Stummick-ache?" says Tallow.

"Naw," boomed Silas.

"What then?" says Mark.

"Them men," says Silas.

"What about 'em?"

"They'll come to work," says Silas. "I seen all of them, but they got together and made up one of them unions or somethin'. Yes, sir, that's what they done. Seems like they was afraid maybe they wouldn't git paid. I argued with them and sassed them till my tongue was blistered, but 'twan't no good. Best I could git out of 'em was that they'd work by the day and git paid every night. If they git paid the first night they'll work the second day, if they git paid the second night they'll work the third day, and so on. But no pay—no work."

"Um!" says Mark. "How many of 'em?"

"Nine," says Silas.

"What wages?"

"Mostly two dollars a day."

"Some more?"

"A couple gits two and a quarter, and one, the sawyer, he gits two seventy-five."

"Twenty dollars 'll do it. Now, Silas, if you was g-goin' to raise twenty dollars to-morrow, how'd you go at it?"

"Me?" says Silas. "Me go at it? Woosh!

How'd I go at whittlin' out a locomotive engine with a penknife? Tell me that. Twenty dollars in a day! Say, young feller, there hain't twenty dollars in Wicksville."

"There's enough m-money," says Mark. "The t-trouble is to git it."

"If that's all that's standin' in our way," says I, "just the trouble of gittin' it, I don't see no cause to worry." I was a little sarcastic because it looked to me like we was busted before we started.

Mark he looked at me kind of squintin', but didn't say a word. Pretty soon he says to Silas: "We got to-night and till the whistle blows to-morrow n-n-night.... And only twenty dollars to raise."

"That's all," says I. "Might's well be twenty million."

That sort of riled Mark and he turned around and says to me, "I'll b-bet you I git that twenty before f-f-four o'clock to-morrow."

"What 'll you bet?" says I.

He figgered a minute. "If I win," says he, "you take your baby s-s-sister's doll and carriage and wheel it around town for an hour Saturday n-night singin' 'Bye, Baby Buntin'' to it. If you win, I walk around town an hour Saturday night with a card on my b-b-back sayin' whatever you want to p-print on it."

I might have known better, but I was sort of

riled, and before I got time to do any thinking I up and told him it was a bet. And right there I begun to get sorry. If there's one thing in the world Mark Tidd hates it's to be made ridiculous. He just can't bear to have folks poke fun at him. I ought to have known he had some kind of an idea or he wouldn't have made a bet like that. Anyhow, I'd let myself in for it, and there wasn't any getting out.

"I'll start thinkin' up what to print on that card," says I.

He just grinned and turned to Silas Doolittle. "You tell those m-men," he says, "that they kin have their money as s-soon as the whistle blows to-morrow night."

"Have you got it?" I says, suspicious in a minute.

"No," says he.

"Know where you kin git it?"

"No," says he.

"Then," says I to Silas, "I wouldn't go makin' any positive promises to nobody."

Mark went off to the room he was going to use for an office, and sat down on a wabbly chair that was in it. I could see him through the door. He sat there pinching his fat cheek like he always does when he has something to puzzle out. He didn't whittle. If he had started in to whittle I'd have felt more cheerful, for when he starts to figger and whittle, then

you can make up your mind he's having a hard time. Whittling with him is a sort of last resort. He don't do it unless everything else fails. Pretty soon he came out and says to Silas:

"There's a cart and horse b-b'longin' to this mill, hain't there?"

"Yes," says Silas.

"Better have it here at s-seven in the m-mornin'," says he. "You kin drive a horse, Tallow?"

"Yes," says Tallow, "I calc'late to be consid'able of a driver."

"I'll take a chance on your d-d-drivin'," says he. "It's your loadin' ability that's worryin' me—but you'll have Binney to help you. Wouldn't be fair to set Plunk on the job helpin' me win a bet ag'in' him."

"What's the idee?" says I.

"Never you mind," he says. Then he motioned Silas to a window and pointed out. "How many cords you figger's in that pile of slabs and strips?"

"Hain't no idee. Maybe ten, maybe fifteen. Shouldn't be s'prised if there was more."

"What you been accustomed to d-d-doin' with your slabs?"

"Nothin'," says Silas. "Gen'ally when the spring flood comes they git washed down the river. Good thing. Sort of cleans up the place."

"Uh-huh," says Mark, and out he goes. It was half past four then, but before five he was back with Jim Root, that runs the wood-and-coal yard. I saw him and Jim looking at the slab-pile and went down to see what it was about.

"How much you figger's there?" Jim says.

"Nigh twenty-five cord," says Mark.

"Maybe so. Don't look to me like more 'n fifteen."

"What's wood fetchin'?" says Mark.

"I'm gittin' two 'n' a half. Split I'm gittin' three."

"That there's good s-s-sound wood," says Mark. "Best of the log. Beech and birch and m-maple."

"So I see," says Jim.

"What's it worth to you s-s-split, sawed, and delivered in your yard?"

"Hum! . . . Slabs hain't so good as chunks."

"Better for the kitchen stove," says Mark.

"I might give you a dollar a cord."

"And I might split her and saw her and p-peddle it for two dollars. That would be cuttin' your price f-fifty cents to a dollar. Eh? I calc'late f-folks would rather have slabs off of me for that than chunk wood from you for two and a half and three."

"You couldn't work it," says Jim.

"I got a horse and cart, and I got a buzz-saw

up there, and two fellers with nothin' much else to do. And we figger on havin' quite consid'able quantity of slabs right along. Be kind of disturbin' to the wood-market if I was to p-peddle 'em."

"Might be," says Jim. "I'll give you a dollar 'n' a quarter."

"Sorry I give you the t-t-trouble of walkin' down here for nothin'," says Mark, and he turned away and came toward the mill.

"Hey, there!" yelled Jim. "Don't be in sich a doggone rush. What you askin'?"

Mark came back. "You guess there's f-f-fifteen cord there?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm figgerin' there's more. Now, Mr. Root, I tell you what I'll do. I'll call it f-f-fifteen cord and let you have the lot for two dollars, sawed and split and delivered in your yard—but there's a condition. Cash in advance tomorrow m-m-mornin'. That 'll give you a p-p-profit of fifty cents to a dollar a cord, which is perty good, hain't it? And I'll contract to d-deliver all the slabs we cut at the price so's you'll have control of all our wood. It 'll keep me off the market."

"Tell you what I'll do," says Jim. "I'll give you twenty-five for that pile delivered like you say—cash in advance."

"Nope," says Mark, "thirty or n-nothin'."

"Nothin', then," says Jim.

"All right," says Mark. "Good-by." He walked off again, and so did Jim Root, but before Jim got to the road he turned and came back, and he was pulling a wallet out of his back pocket.

"Hey!" says he, "here's your thirty!"

"Much obliged," says Mark, and he turned around and winked at me. "You want to be down-town Saturday night, Mr. Root. Plunk here is goin' to t-t-try to amuse the folks for an hour or so. I figger he'll be all-fired funny to watch."

"When it comes to a dicker," says Jim, "I take off my hat to you. . . . You'll start to deliverin' to-morrow?"

"First thing," says Mark.

We went up-stairs, and I can tell you I felt pretty foolish. I could see me traipsing around town Saturday night, with the band playing in the square, with my sister's doll and cab, and I could come pretty close to seeing every kid in town tagging after me, making a bunch of remarks that wouldn't do me no good to hear. I could have kicked myself in the stummick if I could have reached it with my toe. But it all did some good, I expect. It learned me a lesson, and that was not to go making bets with Mark Tidd. I might have knowed he had something ready to shoot off, and he wasn't

the kind of feller to take any chances on being made a fool of in public.

"I don't calc'late," says he, after a while, "that you got to worry your b-b-brain makin' up somethin' smart to put on that card, Plunk."

"Looks that way," I says, as short as I could.

Mark went over to Silas Doolittle, who was still sitting on the saw-carriage, and showed the roll of bills to him. "You can t-t-tell your men we'll pay off prompt to-morrow night," he says.

"But how about day after to-morrow?" says I.

"We got t-ten dollars toward that, hain't we?"

"Looks so," says I.

"And we'll git the rest," says he.

"I hain't makin' any bets," says I, and he grinned.

"How'd you git that money?" says Silas Doolittle.

"Slabs," says Mark.

"What slabs?'

"Down in the yard. The ones you been l-l-lettin' the flood carry off."

"You got *money* for 'em?"

"You bet you!" says Mark.

"Well, I swan!" says Silas. "If that hain't the beat of anythin'."

"I read somewheres," says Mark, "that it's

the concern that makes money out of what other concerns wastes that gits ahead. Maybe, Mr. Bugg, you'd 'a' made more money with this mill if you'd 'a' watched out for the little things. Why, I know a mill that burns its sawdust and slabs for fuel, not havin' water-power, but they don't waste their ashes. No, sir. Them wood ashes is good for fertilizer, and they sell every spoonful of 'em for a quarter or more a bushel. Paid the engineer's wages with ashes. That's how to git ahead in the manufacturin' b-b-business."

"I swan!" says Silas again, and sat there waggling his head and looking at Mark like Mark was some kind of a five-legged elephant with pink ears. "I swan!" he says, after a minute, and then he got up and walked out, still waggling his head like a dog with a bee in its ear.

"Anyhow," says I, "we hain't got any more slabs to sell."

"Correct," says Mark. "Guess I'll look over Silas's bookkeepin'."

He went over to the pile of board ends that Silas had used to figger on, and began studying 'em careful.

"I wisht," says he, "that Silas was able to make head or tail to these. I'll bet there's quite consid'able money owin' to this mill."

"What you goin' to do about it?" says I.

"I'm goin' to set down all the n-n-names I kin find here, and the amounts, and try to collect 'em all. Them that's paid won't pay ag'in, but them that hain't paid will mostly be willin' to, I expect. . . . Silas Doolittle was what you might call a slap-up man of business."

CHAPTER IV

"WHAT we got to do," says Mark, next morning, "is to get a l-little money ahead so we won't have to be b-bustin' ourselves every day to p-pay the men. If we only had two-three hunderd d-dollars it 'u'd give us time to start in to run this mill."

"If I had it," says I, "I'd lend it to us."

"There must be some m-m-money owin' to Silas," says Mark. "Let's ask him."

Silas Doolittle Bugg was just sort of roaming around, keeping an eye on things and waggling his head. He didn't seem to be bossing anything, but just strolling around to see the sights. He'd stop and look at the men in the log-yard a minute, and scratch his head and waggle it as much as to say, "Well, if that hain't the beatinest thing I ever see!" like he was astonished 'most to death, you know, when he had been seeing that selfsame sight almost every day of his life. Then he would mogg into the mill and stand alongside the saw for a spell and talk to himself and act as if a saw cutting through a log was a miracle right out of the Bible. I never

saw a man that could get up so much surprise over something that didn't surprise him a bit. He was always surprised. I'll bet it surprised him when he woke up in the morning.

Mark and I went over to him, and Mark says:

"Mr. Bugg, see if you can't think of somebody that owes you some money—somebody you've sold things to."

"Wa-al," says Silas, "I calc'late I've sold a heap of folks a heap of things. Some more and some less. Mostly they been in the habit of payin'. Some has, and I figger there's some that hain't, but for the life of me I can't make out which is which."

Mark jerked a piece of paper out of his pocket and waved it at Silas.

"I've copied off of those p-pieces of wood in the office," says he, "about all I could make out to read. How much of this is paid and how much is owed?"

"When a man paid I mostly looked for his chunk of wood and fired it out of the window," says Silas.

"Then all of these haven't p-paid?"

"I wouldn't go so far 's to say that. I hain't what you might call a good hand at firin' things out of windows. There was times when I aimed at the window and never come near it. Them blocks that didn't go out must 'a' fell back on the floor. And then there was times

when I was too busy to go lookin' for anybody's piece of wood and jest let her slide. No, I don't calc'late you kin tell much by them blocks."

"Looks that way," says Mark. "Who was the last firm you shipped chair-spindles to?"

"Lemme see, now, was that Gorman and Peters, or was it the Family Chair Company? Dummed if I know. Maybe it wasn't neither. But I shipped a mess away jest a few days before I shut down."

"Git paid for 'em?"

"There was money comin' in every leetle while. How d' you expect a feller to remember who it come from? Seems like maybe that there lot wa'n't paid for, though. Seems like."

"Um!" says Mark. "Say, Silas, where's there another mill around here that makes things like we do here?"

"Over to Sunfield; and then there's some over to Bostwick where them chair-factories is."

Mark walked off, and I followed him. He hunted up Tallow and Binney and give them their orders for the day. They was to check up every foot of timber that come into the mill, and to keep track of just how many spindles, or whatever it was, that every man made, and all that. "It's for the c-c-cost system," says Mark. "We got to have f-facts, and have 'em exact."

"While we're doin' that," says Tallow, "what be you goin' to do?"

"I'm goin' to Bostwick," says Mark, "to git two things—information and m-m-money."

"Hope you have luck," says Binney.

"Calc'late to," Mark says, in that funny way of his; it's a determined way. When he speaks like that you know he has made up his mind to do what he's set out to do or bust. "Come on, Plunk," says he to me; "you're goin' along."

We went down to the depot, and Mark yelled for old Lish Peasley, the freight-man. "Mr. Peasley," says he, "who did the last shipment from Bugg's mill go to?"

"Bugg," snapped Lish, and scowled at Mark like he was figgering on taking a nip out of him. "Think all I got to do is keep track of who that old foozle ships stuff to?"

"I know you're m-m-mighty busy," says Mark, as sober as a judge, "and I know what a heap of awful important things you got to be thinkin' about all the t-t-time, but folks says you got a wonderful m-m-memory. I was thinkin' maybe you'd recall about this."

"Huh!" says Lish. "Folks beginnin' to appreciate what a job I got, eh? Beginnin' to see that old Lish is some pumpkins when it comes to rememberin'. 'Bout time! Huh! . . . Now lemme see. Sile he made a less-car shipment along about a week ago, somewheres near.

Remember who it went to? You kin bet I do? Ever hear tell of me forgettin' anythin' havin' to do with this here perfession of mine? I calc'late you didn't."

"I certainly never d-d-did," says Mark.

"Hain't many freight-handlers to touch me," says Lish. " 'Cause why? 'Cause I made a study of it. That's why. Some fellers treats it like a job. I hain't never viewed it so. Perfession 's what I call it. Like bein' a lawyer or a minister or sich. Made a study of it."

"Wonderful," says Mark, and he said it so sincere and natural-like that I almost believed he felt that way about it myself. He didn't even wink at me when he said it. No, sir, you can bet he didn't. When Mark Tidd was doing a thing, he did it thorough. I knew he was taffying Lish, and he knew I knew it, but would he wink at me? Not much. He was pretendin' he did admire Lish, that's what he was doin', and he pretended it so hard that he did admire him while it was going on.

"Who did you say that s-s-shipment went to?" Mark says, in a minute.

"Family Chair Company, of course. Over to Bostwick. How many times have I got to tell you, eh? Got to stand here a-yellin' it at you all the mornin'?"

"Much obleeged," says Mark, and out we went.

We didn't have to wait long for the train to Bostwick, and it was just an hour's ride, so we got there quite a while before noon. Bostwick was considerable of a place, with lots of factories and about fifty-six times as many stores and houses as Wicksville. I was bothered a little thinking maybe we might get lost, but then I says to myself:

"So long as you're with Mark Tidd you're all right. You might get lost, Plunk Smalley, but there hain't any chance of mislayin' Mark. Might as well try to lose the Goddess of Liberty." So I went along with him and kept my mouth shut, which is a wise thing to do in a heap of cases.

Mark he prances up to a policeman and says, "Mister, where be we g-g-goin' to find the Family Chair Company?"

The policeman looked at Mark and grinned, and then he says, "They don't make that kind of furniture, son."

"What kind?" says Mark.

"Iron," says the policeman.

"Hain't l-l-lookin' for iron furniture."

"You hain't? Now I made sure you was. Lookin' at you, I jest naturally says to myself, here's a feller lookin' for a chair he kin set in without smashin' it flat. That's what I says. And, says I, no wooden chair made 'll hold him more 'n a second. No, if you're lookin' for

furniture to set in yourself, young feller, better go somewheres else."

He didn't say it mean and disagreeable, but jolly and good-natured, and Mark didn't get mad like he generally does when somebody twits him about being fat. He grinned back and says:

" 'Tain't for me, mister. I hain't usin' furniture no m-m-more. I busted up so much the f-f-folks makes me set on the floor. There's a dent in the f-floor where I gen'ally set, but Dad's propped it up from underneath with a four-by-four. . . . Where'd you say that factory was?"

"Hop on this street-car," says the policeman, "and git off when it gits to the end of the line. You'll see a whoppin'-big factory to your left."

"Yes," says Mark.

"Well, that hain't it," says the policeman, and grins again. "It's the whoppin'-big one to your *right*."

"Much obleeged," says Mark, and we went out and got on the car that was stopping. It took us maybe twenty minutes to get to the end of the line, and there we got off and looked around. Say, I never saw a factory the size of that one. It was big enough to hold the whole town of Wicksville, with some of the outlying districts thrown in.

"Come on," says Mark.

"What we goin' to do, now we're here?" says I.

"Hanged if I know," says he, "but we're goin' to do somethin'."

We went to the office entrance, and there was a boy with a uniform on, and brass buttons, setting behind a desk and looking as important as a banty rooster.

"What do you kids want?" says he, proud and haughty. "If you hain't got business here, don't be hangin' around. We don't want any kids loafin' here."

"We come to see the m-m-monkeys," says Mark, solemn and gentle.

"Monkeys?" says the boy, and set up a laugh that was enough to make a saint mad. "There hain't no monkeys. Think this is a circus? This is a chair-factory."

"Oh!" says Mark. "Chair-factory, eh? Well, I see how I come to m-m-make the m-mistake. It was lookin' at you. I seen you all tricked up in that monkey suit and how much you l-looked like a monkey, and of course I f-figgered it was a monkey-show inside. When you come to speak I was sure of it, 'cause you talked jest like I imagine a trained monkey would talk—if its trainer had forgot to teach it manners."

The kid opened his mouth and panted once; then he shut his mouth careful, like he was afraid something would escape out of it, and he turned pink and red and let out a cough, and wiggled in his chair. Seemed like nothing occurred to him

to say just at that minute. Mark did the saying.

"We're here on business," says Mark, "and we want to see the man that owns this factory. We want to see him *quick*."

"He don't want to hire any boys."

"He will," says Mark, short and sharp. "He'll want to hire one to t-t-take your job if you don't git a move on you."

Just then a tall gentleman came along the hall and looked at Mark, and sort of grinned when he heard what Mark said. He stopped and says, "What seems to be the main difficulty here?"

"We came to see the m-m-man that owns this factory—on m-mighty important business—and this kid spoke a piece he didn't seem to know very well," says Mark.

The man coughed into his hand and says: "I own the mill, young man. What's your important business?"

"Money," says Mark.

"That's always important," says the man.

"You bet," says Mark. "So we come to git some. You owe us f-f-for 'most a car of chair-s-spindles shipped a week ago, and if you had any idea how much we need that money I'll bet you'd send it by telegraph. Honest, I dunno 's *anybody* ever needed money as bad as we need that."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Mark Tidd and this is Plunk Smalley. We're from Wicksville and we're runnin' Silas Doolittle Bugg's mill. He got it all messed up and we s-s-stepped in to straighten him out."

"Silas Bugg, eh?" says the man. "And you stepped in to straighten him out? Mill experts, are you?"

"We hain't much of any experts," says Mark, "but when it comes to business, anythin' would be an improvement over Silas. We calc'late to pull him through."

"How much do we owe you?"

"Silas don't know and we don't know."

"Then how do you expect I can pay you? It's customary to send an invoice."

"Not with Silas it hain't. Silas never got introduced to an invoice. But we got the amount of stuff that was s-s-shipped, and we figgered you knew how much you was payin' for it. 'Most gen'ally men that's been able to git to own a factory like this know what they're payin' for a thing before they buy it."

"Hum!" says the man, and he looked at Mark kind of interested. "You got some powers of observation, haven't you?"

"That's common s-s-sense," says Mark.

"A good many folks don't have common sense. . . . But you're right this time. We had a contract with Silas Bugg. I'll look it up. When did you ship those spindles?"

Mark told him.

"Your money isn't due, then," says the man. "We have thirty days to pay, and almost two weeks of it are left."

"Um!" says Mark. "Git a discount for thirty days?"

"Two per cent.," says the man, trying to look severe and sober, but with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Business is business," says Mark; "if we ask for s-somethin' we hain't entitled to we're willin' to pay for it. If you git two per cent. for thirty days, you ought to get three, anyhow, for f-f-fourteen."

"If I pay now you'll give me an extra one per cent. discount?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come into the office and we'll look up Bugg's contract. How is it you haven't a copy?"

"Most likely Silas Doolittle used his c-copy to kindle a f-f-fire with," says Mark.

The man, whose name turned out to be Mr. Rushmore, took us into his office and told us to sit down, and pressed a button. In come a girl and he told her to bring the Silas Bugg contract. She came back in a minute and put it on his desk. Mr. Rushmore read it through and sort of frowned. Then he figured a little.

"According to this," he says, "we owe you three hundred and sixteen dollars."

"With the discount off?" says Mark.

"Yes; I figured that."

"More 'n I hoped," says Mark. "That 'll t-take care of the pay-roll for quite a spell."

"This last shipment completed your contract," says Mr. Rushmore. "Do you want to make a new contract with me on the same terms?"

"I m-may," says Mark, "but not to-day."

"Why not to-day?"

"Because," says Mark, "Silas Doolittle never knew what it cost him to manufacture, and he was always l-losin' money. It don't take much work to guess he was sellin' for too little. We're workin' out the costs of everything, to get it exact, and until we know we hain't makin' a contract."

"By Jove!" says the man. "Whose idea was that?"

"Mine," says Mark.

"Who is running that mill?"

"Us four boys."

"No man to boss you?"

"Only man around the p-premises is Silas Doolittle."

"And you stepped in to untangle things, eh? Well, young man, I shouldn't be surprised if you did it. Where did you get your ideas of business?"

"Hain't got many, but we got to have some-

thin' to go by. Common sense tells a f-f-feller he can't make money sellin' for less 'n cost."

"That's a great truth," says Mr. Rushmore.

"How about our m-m-money?" says Mark.

"I'll have a check for you at once. When you get around to it, let me know. We need quite a lot of spindles and will need them all this year."

"Glad to supply 'em," says Mark, "but not till we got our costs."

"I'll take a chance if you will," says Mr. Rushmore, and I saw a twinkle come into his eye again. "I'll raise the figures in this contract five per cent. That ought to make you come out right."

Mark studied a minute. "No," says he; "that wouldn't be business for either of us. We m-m-might not be gettin' enough, or you m-might be p-payin' too much. The only way is to be f-f-fair to both parties. We want you satisfied as well as us."

"Son," says Mr. Rushmore, "you'll get along. That's a business principle that will bring success. The satisfied customer is the valuable customer. Stick to it."

"I'm goin' to," says Mark.

Mr. Rushmore had a check made out and gave it to us. "What are you going to do the rest of the day?" says he.

"We're goin' to go around some of these turnin'-mills in Bostwick and see how they

work, and t-t-talk to some of the bosses and git what information we can. I got a n-notion Silas's way of doin' things might be improved some."

"Maybe you're right," says Mr. Rushmore. "We do quite a bit of our own turning. Glad to have you go through the plant."

"Make any dowels?" says Mark, and I wondered what he asked that for.

"About a hundred millions a year."

"Um! . . . Any money in 'em?"

"We think so."

"Make all you n-need?"

"We have to buy a great many."

"Maybe," says Mark, "we kin do some b-business in dowels, too. We got a dowel-machine that Silas bought because he thought it was pretty, or s-somethin'. Never set it up."

"When you're ready, let me know," says Mr. Rushmore, and he sent for a man to show us through the factory. It was mighty interesting and we found out a lot of things that was valuable to know. After dinner we went to a couple of small turning-mills, about the size of ours, and we got to know quite a lot that was worth money to us. At five o'clock we took the train back to Wicksville, and the first man we saw when we got off the train was Amassa P. Wiggamore, the man that tried to buy our dam.

CHAPTER V

THINGS sort of pottered along a day or two after we got back. Mostly Mark Tidd was spoiling a lot of paper with figures. I guess he figured in his sleep. He was so full of machine hours and board feet and labor costs and handling costs and such like that he hadn't room in him for anything else but grub. You couldn't fill him so full of *anything* but what he would still have room enough to stow away enough stuff to eat to astonish a hippopotamus.

When he wasn't figuring he was asking questions, and every time he asked a question he had to figure some more; and then one day he got acquainted with a thing called "overhead expenses." Well, you never saw such a muss as that kicked up. He said overhead meant the salaries of the superintendents and office force, and insurance, and taxes, and all that; and he said it made him do all his figures over again and add to his costs. I says to the other fellows that if Mark kept on raising his costs the folks that wanted to buy would have to take a balloon to get up to them. But Mark says there was no

use selling unless you could sell at a profit. That sounded sensible even to me.

But Silas Doolittle didn't understand it at all. I guess he figured that any money he got at all was profit. It didn't matter what a thing cost, when he got real money for it, why, he was that much ahead. But he didn't try to interfere, which was lucky for him. If anybody goes to interfering with Mark Tidd when Mark thinks he's doing what he ought to do, then that person wants to go out and get an insurance policy against having something disagreeable and unexpected happen to him.

I asked Mark if he figured lead-pencils and paper in his overhead, because he was using up enough of them to support a couple of good-sized families. He said he was, and he said he was figuring me in as overhead, too. Not that I got a salary, but he let on it was a detriment to the business just to have me hanging around. I don't think he really meant it, though you can't ever tell. Maybe I was a detriment, but I was doing the best I knew how.

Saturday morning Mark he come over to me and says, "To-night's the n-night, Plunk."

"What night?" says I, because I had forgotten.

"Doll-cab and l-l-lullaby."

I can't write lullaby the way he stuttered it, and if I could I wouldn't. It would waste

almost as much paper as he did with his figuring. He put more than seven hunderd "1's" into it.

"Huh!" says I, not much pleased about it, and who would be, I'd like to know?

"Say, Plunk," says Mark, "I t-t-tell you what I'll do. I'll let you off this time. It 'll teach you not to bet. Bettin's a m-m-mighty bad habit for a young f-f-feller like you."

"An old man like you," says I, sarcastic as vinegar, "is all right, though."

"Sure," says he, with a grin, "but I'll let you off."

"Would you 'a' done what you agreed to if you lost the bet?"

"Yes," says he.

"Then," says I, "so will I. When I say I'll do a thing, I'll do it."

He looked at me for a minute and then he just sort of touched me on the shoulder and says: "I might 'a' knowed you'd say that. I've b-b-been in enough things with you to know you wasn't a q-q-quitter. When I see you hikin' around with that doll-cab to-night, hanged if I won't be *proud* I know you."

Yes, sir, he said that to me, and he said it like he meant it. Somehow after that I didn't care who laughed at me when I was making an idiot of myself. I felt *good*. And right there I made up my mind to one thing: It's a heap better to look like an idiot on account of keeping your

word than it would be to look like a college perfessor by breaking it.

All the week that man Amassa P. Wiggamore had been hanging around town. As I said, he was the first man we saw when we got off the train from Bostwick. He didn't come near us, though, but he spent a heap of time talking to folks, and Mark said he saw him coming out of the bank two or three times. Then we heard a rumor that the Power Company had bought up a lot of land up above town a few miles—farms that bordered on the river along the bluffs—and that it was planning to have a big storage reservoir there four or five miles long and a couple of miles wide, a regular lake. It was going to store water there during the spring freshets and the rainy season and then let it run down the river when the dry months come along and the river wasn't anything but a trickle. It was to give an even flow of water the whole year around so he would have it to turn his turbine water-wheels and manufacture electricity.

"Um!" says Mark. "Looks to me like he was figurin' on that l-l-lake comin' about to us. L-looks like he was plannin' to have his big dam right where our dam is."

"How kin he?" says I.

"He can't," says Mark, and his jaw set so you would have thought he was biting some-

thing. "He can't unless he pays our price for this mill."

"If he can't git this place, where else kin he build his dam?"

"I don't know," says Mark, "b-b-but I'm goin' to f-f-find out."

I didn't feel very comfortable in my mind the rest of that day, thinking about what was going to happen to me at night, but all the same I was going to go through with it, and I says to myself that if any kid got *too* fresh when I was parading, I'd have something to say to him the next time I caught him. I hain't much for fighting, but, all the same, I hain't the kind to put up with more than I can stand. A good-natured fellow ought to fight about once a year just to show folks he hain't too good-natured.

That night I waited till half past seven, and then I sneaked sister's baby-cab and down-town I went. The band was just coming out of the Firemen's Hall and forming a circle in the square when I got there. Mark and Tallow and Binney were sitting on the railing of the town pump, waiting, and I trundled past them without so much as looking. I pretended I didn't see them at all, and pushed the cab right around the band. For a while nobody noticed me because the band was trying to get up steam. That's the kind of a band we have.

Our band is what you could call home made.

The cornet-player had some lessons, so they made him leader, but the rest of the fellows just bought horns and went out back of the barn where nobody could heave things at them, and *learned.* My! when they was learning but Wicksville was an unhealthy place early in the morning and at night. Everywhere you turned there was a fellow sitting with his eyes shut and his cheeks puffed out, trying to make a noise on a barytone or an alto or a trombone. Mostly for the first week they couldn't make any noise at all, except now and then by accident, and that noise would be the worst kind of a *blatt* you ever heard. It got so bad, after a while, that the Town Board give orders nobody should practise on a horn in the corporate limits before five in the morning and after nine at night.

After a while most of them got so they could make different kinds of noises, but I dunno 's any of 'em ever got so's they could tell ahead of time just what kind of a noise was coming out. The fellow with the big bass horn could go *umph-ha, umph-ha, umph-ha* over and over, but mostly it was the same *umph-ha.* He didn't seem able to make different kinds. So, no matter what tune they was playing, he would go *umph-ha*ing along regardless. The altos had a kind of an easy time because there were four of them, and they sort of picked over their tunes. Each fellow found a note he could play and stuck

to it, so that between them they got most of the notes in. Of that crowd—the altos—Deputy-Sheriff Whoppleham was about the best. He was tall and skinny, with a hooked beak and an Adam's apple bigger than a Northern Spy. When he tooted his Adam's apple woggled up and down like an elevator. He went at his horn like he planned to eat it. First he would lean his head 'way back and then tilt it sideways and shut one eye. Then he'd let her go. After every note he'd shut the eye he had open and open the eye he had shut. Sort of kept time that way, I guess.

The man that played the barytone was all messed up with whiskers, and it was a wonder how he ever piled his horn through them to find his mouth. He kept time with his right leg, working it like a horse with the spring-halts. But the leader he was the cream of the performance. He would woggle his horn up and down two or three times, and then make a special big woggle as a signal for the tune to start. Then he would start keeping time for everybody by lifting first one foot, and then the other, like an elephant. Before a tune was over he'd tramped up most of the space inside the band, and he felt pretty cheap if he didn't get through the piece at least a minute ahead of everybody else. Then he'd look at them sort of superior and sarcastic and ask why in tunket they couldn't

keep the right time, with him beating it so plain.

Well, as I say, the band was trying to start in on a tune. They usually had to make three or four jumps at it before they decided just what they was going to do, and then maybe three or four of 'em would find they was playing the "Maiden's Prayer" when the rest of them was playing "Star-spangled Banner." Not that it made much difference that I could see. They all sounded alike, and there wasn't one tune that could scare a horse less than any other tune.

Pretty soon they got under way and was mowing the music down like anything, and folks sort of lost interest. Then a kid spied me, and he showed me to another kid, and *he* showed me to some more, and they pointed me out to everybody, and the trombone-player got his eye on me and sort of strangled and let out a strip of noise that sounded like a cow berrering to be milked. In about two minutes everybody saw me, but I never looked to right nor left, but went right along wheeling my doll-cab and singing a lullaby.

A crowd began to follow me around and make remarks, and perty soon old Mrs. Coots, that's always messing in wherever anybody's sick, came and stood right in front of me.

"Plunk Smalley," says she, "what ails you? Be you out of your head?"

"No, ma'am," says I, and tried to get past.

"He is," says she to the crowd, "but a-course he don't know it. Most likely he's had some sort of a knock on the head, or maybe he's comin' down with gallopin' typhoid. Here, you Plunk, lemme feel of your head."

"I hain't needin' no medicine," says I, for I seen her feeling in her reticule. Mostly she carried the meanest part of a drug-store in there, and just ached to give it to somebody. She was never so happy as when she was shoving some kind of medicine into a person that was worse to take than it was to have whatever disease was the matter with you.

I tried to dodge her, but she caught hold of me. I tried to jerk away, but she yells for somebody to help her, and about a dozen sprung forward to give a hand, well knowing that nothing was wrong with me, but having a mean desire to get in on a joke.

"Pore leetle feller!" she says to me. "Jest feel of his forehead. Like fire, that's what it is. I'll bet his temper'choor is more 'n a hunderd and fifty. We got to git him in bed quick, with some ice on his stummick, or maybe he'll be passin' away right on our hands."

"Stummick!" says I. "Nothin' the matter with my stummick."

"It don't matter," says she. "I was readin' in a book that you ought to pack folks in ice

when they got fever. And it's my experience that when a boy is sick it's all due to his stummick; so we'll just pack your stummick, Plunk. 'Twon't be pleasant, but it's for your good."

I've noticed that most things that's for your good is doggone unpleasant.

By this time there was a big crowd around, calling out things and laughing fit to split, and I'll bet the band was mad as anything because nobody was paying any attention to them. Bands likes to have folks listen and admire them, I've took note. Maybe I could have broke away and run for it, but I'd made a promise and I was going to stick it out, so I looked up at Mrs. Coots and begun to sing a lullaby to my doll.

"Jest listen!" says she. "Hain't it pitiful? Maybe it hain't no disease," says she, "but that he's gone out of his head permanent. Come to think of it, I been afraid somethin' like that would happen to him. He hain't never acted quite *right*. I'll bet he's been crazy right along, only we hain't took particular note. Crazy folks is sly," says she. "How long you been wantin' to parade around with a doll and sing to it, Plunk?"

"I never wanted to," says I, "but I *got* to."

"See that?" she says to everybody. "He can't help it. I 'spect he realizes he hain't sane and tries to act sane, but can't manage it. Hain't it a shame, and him so young! Jest

think of him bein' shut up in an asylum from his age. Maybe he'll live to be ninety like Clem Adams's second wife's cousin, that thought she was a cook-stove and used to go around tryin' to fry onions in a pan on her head."

"Lemme go," says I, "'fore I git violent."

"Violent!" says she, as satisfied as a purring cat. "I calc'late he'll be dangerous. I'll bet right now he's figgerin' on doin' somebody a damage."

"I be," says I.

Just then Mark Tidd came through the crowd, looking as grave as a pelican, only fatter. "Mrs. Coots," says he, "l-lemme try to manage the poor f-f-feller. He knows me well," says he, "and I guess I kin g-git him away 'fore he hurts anybody. You got to humor sich cases," says he.

"He might maul you," says she.

"I hain't afraid," says he; "jest leggo and give me a t-t-try."

So she let go, and Mark takes me by the arm and says: "Plunk, this is Mark Tidd. D'you know me?"

"You *bet* I know you," says I.

"There," says he to Mrs. Coots; "he knows me."

"He's lookin' at you perty mean," says she.

"I calc'late he feels some het up," says Mark. "Now, Plunk," he says, "I know how you

f-f-feel. You feel like that baby ought to hear the b-band and git some cool air, don't you? Well, you're right. Yes, sir. But hain't you scairt that maybe she'll catch c-c-cold?"

"Somebody 'll catch somethin'," says I.

"I t-t-tell you what," says he, "if I was you I'd git that baby indoors and put her to b-b-bed. She'll be gettin' mumps or somethin' if you drag her around in the night air. You jest take a walk with me and we'll put her to bed. Hain't that best?"

"Somebody's goin' to be put to bed," says I, "but it won't be with mumps."

He sort of chuckled. "Plunk," says he, in a whisper, "we got to git out of here. That man Wiggamore 's just gone off up the street with Jason Barnes that owns the land next above our m-m-mill, and we got to f-f-find out what they're talkin' about, if we kin." Then he says, out loud, "Now come along like a s-s-sensible father," says he. "Come on."

I started along with him, and the crowd hooted and laughed, but Mrs. Coots was as serious as ever and tagged along with us.

"I got to see him shut up," she says. "Runnin' at large he's a danger to the community."

"Scoot!" says Mark, and he give me a little shove.

You can believe I scooted. If you ever tried to run pushing a doll-cart in front of you, you

know what a time I had. The thing kept wabbling and trying to go off sideways. Seemed like it was alive. But I made good time. I don't reckon Mrs. Coots could have caught me if she was riding on a race-horse.

I made tracks for the Baptist church, and jumped into a dark corner and stood still. Pretty soon Mark came lumbering past and I called to him. He stopped.

"She's give up the c-c-chase," says he; "and now l-let's git after Wiggamore. He's got quite a start."

"I'm willin'," says I. "But I'm goin' to git even with Mrs. Coots or bust."

CHAPTER VI

MARK and I scooted along, keeping mostly to back streets until we were where nobody was likely to see us; then we turned toward the river and went down to Mr. Barnes's house. His place sat on top of a bluff, but down on the river level he owned quite a strip of flat ground that he used for a garden when the flood didn't come and clean it out. We sort of nosed around, and pretty soon we run across Wiggamore and Jason Barnes sitting on a bench out on the edge of the bluff. There was a clump of lilac-bushes just back of them, and we got back of the clump. We could hear good.

"The dam," says Wiggamore, "will go across right there," and he pointed down at *our* dam. "Our engineers figure to make it about eighty feet high. The water won't come over the top, but will be released as we want it through a tunnel under the dam. So, from here back will be a lake. Fine thing for the town."

"Fine," says Jason. "I dunno 's I got any especial use for a lake, but I kin see how folks

might. Have boats on it, and sich. As for me, I wouldn't git in no boat. Not any kind of a boat. I'm one of these dry-land fellers, I am. As long, I says to myself, as you stay on dry land and it don't rain too hard, you hain't ever goin' to git drownded."

"You're right," said Mr. Wiggamore. "But what I wanted to see you about was this: We want to buy that dam site down there. It belongs to a man named Bugg."

"Silas Doolittle Bugg," says Jason.

"But he doesn't seem to have much to do with it. As nearly as I can make out, he has turned it over to a boy by the name of Tidd."

"Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd," says Jason.

"A fat boy," says Wiggamore, "and an impertinent one. I talked with him a few minutes, and it was all I could do to keep my hands off him."

"Better let him alone. Better let him alone," says Jason. "Folks mostly don't interfere with him."

"He said he wouldn't sell the dam for less than fifteen thousand dollars—and that included the mill."

"If he says so," Jason let on, "why, I guess that's what he means. You want to inquire around some about that boy. He's smarter 'n greased lightnin'."

"I'll smart him," says Wiggamore. "I want your help."

"Um! . . . I've lived a peaceful life, Mr. Wiggamore, and I hain't hankerin' to mix in with Mark Tidd."

"I'm talking business. You can understand that I've got to have that dam. It is the only place where we can build a dam for this reservoir, but I'm not going to pay him any ridiculous price for it. We might go a thousand or so, but that's all. I've looked up this man Bugg, and he's pretty close to bankrupt."

"So folks says. It's my nature to mind my own business and not mix into other folks's affairs."

"Unless there's money in it," says Wiggamore.

"That," says Jason, "might put another light onto it."

"I'm willing to pay you for your services. Now what I want you to do is to nose around and see if you can find where Bugg owes any money. Then buy up the debts as cheaply as you can. I'll furnish the money."

"What do you want of sich debts? Silas hain't much on payin' debts. 'Tain't as though he made a habit of payin' up. Mostly he forgits 'em."

"I'll see that he remembers. As soon as we own those debts, we'll throw him into

bankruptcy and bid in the property for a trifle."

"Um! . . . Like I says a minute back, I hain't for proddin' in other folks's business."

"When I pay you it becomes your business, doesn't it?"

"To be sure. To be sure. Makes all the difference in the world. I was just sayin' the other day that money always makes a difference. Yes, sir. If you got money you're different than what you be if you hain't. If you want money you're different than what you be if you don't want it. On the other hand, if there wasn't no money not much of anythin' would make any difference, eh? I'm a sensible man, Mr. Wiggamore, and I calc'late not to let no day end without I've added some to what I got in the savin's-bank. My view of money is this: It's somethin' to git all of that you kin, and to let go of as little of as you got to. If you got a dollar, why, you got a dollar; if you up and spend it, what you got then? Nothin' but vain regrets, says I."

"Right," says Mr. Wiggamore. "I see you are a wise man, and I like to do business with wise men. I'm sure I shall find much work for you, for I need men who think the way you do."

"Much obleeged," says Jason, purring like a tabby-cat laying in a sunbeam. You could 'most see him hump up his back to be scratched.

"The only thing I don't take to about this here is that Mark Tidd is in it. But I calc'late you and me is equal to one fat boy. Now maybe I got some suggestions like. You kin bet that there Tidd boy will make money out of that mill if he's let be. He's got the knack of it. If he's let be, mark you! Was you willin' to see him let be, or would it be worth a man's while to sort of kind of mix in once in a while?"

"For instance?"

"Things happens in mills," says Jason, confidential-like. "Somethin' might get wedged into the water-wheel. There's ways of messin' up machinery so's it won't run."

"I see you're going to be a valuable man for me."

"Um! . . . Wa-al, suppose we was to bind the bargain, then."

"Eh? Bind the bargain?"

"I was wonderin' how I was goin' to be able to put any money in that savin's-account of mine to-morrer."

"Oh! And how much will bind the bargain?"

"Suppose we was to say five dollars."

Wiggamore grunted and handed over a bill. I felt Mark pinch me, and he whispered:

"Workin' cheap, hain't he? I hain't much afraid of a f-f-feller that 'll sell his d-decency for f-five dollars. Now if he'd 'a' stuck Wiggamore for a hunderd I'd been some worried. About all

Jason's goin' to be is a nuisance—that and *sorry*."

"I'd admire to make him sorry," says I.

"Jest be p-patient. Jason's goin' to wisht he never see or heard of Wiggamore and his f-f-five-dollar bills. I'm goin' to do some hard thinkin' about Jason." Then he says: "Come on. I calc'late we've heard about all there is to hear."

"Wonder if Silas Doolittle really owes anybody money?"

"Most likely. *He* wouldn't know, though. We got to go diggin' into him for d-d-debts like you dig in a mine. Maybe we'll scoop some up, and maybe we'll just have to wait till they t-turn up." He stopped and banged his leg. "No, we won't have to w-wait. We'll sort of nip Mr. Wiggamore's scheme in the bud."

"How?" says I.

"Advertise," says he.

"I dunno 's I understand."

"L-let's git under a light where I kin see," says he, "and I'll git up somethin' to p-put in the paper."

So we sneaked off like a couple of Injuns and sat down under a street light, and Mark got out some paper and a pencil and went to writing. This is what he wrote:

WARNING.—Wicksville folks is warned to look out for a slick scrouger that is going to go around trying to buy debts. He's going to try to buy them cheap, but the

folks that sell will be sorry. Especially folks that are owed by Silas Doolittle Bugg. If anybody comes to pay you less for a debt than is owed you, don't take the money. Fetch your bill right to Silas Doolittle Bugg's mill and give it to Mark Tidd. Silas is getting in shape to pay every honest debt. If Silas owes you money, see Mark Tidd about it right off. But be ready to prove that he owes you. Take warning and don't sell your debts. There's a mighty mean trick being done.

"There," says he, when he got the writing finished. "I guess that will set 'em to t-t-thinkin'. I don't b'lieve anybody will sell Jason a debt till he sees me first. What you think?"

"If I know Wicksville," says I, "there'll be consid'able talk goin' around when that advertisement comes out in the *Trumpet*."

"You bet," says Mark.

"Let's git home to bed," says I. "Between one thing and another to-night I'm 'most done out."

"Mrs. Coots 'll be layin' for you with a plaster to p-p-put on your stummick," says he.

"Before you kin put a plaster on a stummick," says I, "you got to catch your stummick. Mine's goin' to be movin' around rapid."

We mogged along home. When we got to the corner where I turn off we stopped a minute, and I says to Mark:

"If anybody sends in debts against Silas Doolittle, what you goin' to do about it?"

"Do?" says he, surprised-like. "Why, pay 'em, of course!"

"What with?" says I.

"Money," says he.

"Money," says I, "is like stummicks—you got to catch both of 'em before you kin use 'em."

"When you got to have a thing," says he, "you m-mostly git it."

That was Mark Tidd all over. If a thing had to be done, or if there was something that he had to have, why, there was an end of it. He didn't waste time fussing about how hard it was to do, or thinking maybe he couldn't get it. No, sirree. He just went ahead and tried to get it, and while he was trying he kept right on believing he was going to come out right. He was the kind of a fellow that digs in. I guess maybe that's one of the main reasons why he manages to do things other folks don't do. It hain't always that he's smarter, though, goodness knows, he *is* smarter. But he won't let on that he's beat till he *is* beat, and then he won't let on. It's hard work and being determined that gets things for him. He's that stubborn you wouldn't believe. "I got to do it," says he, and then he does it. Somebody else would say: "I ought to do it, but I dunno how in tunket I'm going to manage it. Looks like it was impossible." Well, while that other fellow was worrying and feeling sorry for himself, Mark would have the thing half done.

"How's your cost system gittin' on?" says I.

"Fine," says he. "About Monday we kin b-begin to hustle for b-business. I kin come p-perty clost to tellin' what it costs to make everythin' on our list."

"Was Silas's prices too low?"

"Low!" says he. "He lost more money on every article he sold than what he was p-paid for it. If he sold a thing for a dollar, like as not he l-lost a dollar and ten cents. I've been gettin' what information I could f-from other mills about their prices. Why, Silas has been undersellin' everybody scandalous. This hain't a very big mill, but I'll say right out in m-meetin' that if Silas had sold all he made this l-last year at the p-prices I'm goin' to ask, he could 'a' paid himself a salary of maybe a hunderd dollars a m-month, and showed a profit besides of two and m-maybe three thousand d-dollars."

"But he didn't," says I.

"He come clost to losin' that m-much."

"It 'll take a year to pay his debts—what he owes your father and the rest."

"We don't have to worry about F-father. He'll wait. I'm goin' to have that d-d-dowel-machinery set up next week, and I calc'late we kin git orders for a l-lot. The way I f-figger, that machinery alone ought to make a profit of eight-ten dollars a day."

"Mark," says I, "I been kind of thinkin' about this Power Company and their dam.

It 'll be a good thing for the town and the state."

"To be sure," says Mark.

"Somehow it don't seem just right for a dinky little mill like this to be preventin' a big public improvement like that, that's goin' to cost 'most a million dollars."

"'Tain't right," says Mark, "but it hain't the m-mill's fault. It's Wiggamore's fault. Is it f-fair for Silas to lose all he's got to benefit the p-public?"

"Don't seem so," says I.

"If there's g-goin' to be sich a heap of benefit from takin' our dam, them thet gits the b-benefit ought to be willin' to p-pay for it. That's fair, hain't it?"

"Yes," says I.

"Because a thing's *big*," says he, "is no sign it's got a right to gouge somethin' else because it's l-l-little."

"No."

"Well, I won't be f-found standin' in the way of their Power Company the minute it wants to be fair and d-d-decent. But so long as it tries to smouge Silas I'll fight. Yes, sir, I'll *fight*."

"Guess you're right," says I.

"And," says he, "one piece of f-f-fightin' I'm goin' to do concerns Jason Barnes. He's a sneakin' old foozle, and he's goin' to wish he never heard of Wiggamore or a dam or Silas

before he's more 'n twenty year older 'n what he is."

"What do you want for the mill, anyhow? How much you figger Wiggamore ought to pay?"

"What it's worth," says he, "and not a cent m-more or a cent l-less."

"That sounds fair, anyhow," says I.

"It's what we'll git," says he.

"I've heard tell these big companies was hard to beat."

"Then," says he, "that jest m-means that m-much more hard work. Because," says he, "we're a-goin' to b-beat 'em."

"Good night," says I.

CHAPTER VII

"THE t-trouble," says Mark, next morning, "is that we got to wait for our m-money a month after we ship."

"How?" says I.

"Why, we put the stuff on cars and s-s-send it. Whoever buys it has got a month to pay for it."

"So," says I, "even if we have the best kind of luck, which hain't likely, it 'll be a month before any money comes in—and maybe more, because everybody won't pay up prompt."

"Yes," says he.

"So," says I, "we've got a month, anyhow, and we've got to pay the men, and pay our bills and everythin', and no money comin' in."

"That's the f-f-fix," says he.

"And we hain't got an order," says I.

"I just sent out my f-figgers to some of our customers."

"They'll be mad," says I, "because they been used to buyin' at Silas Doolittle's prices, and now you've gone and raised 'em."

"You bet I have," says he.

"What if you don't git any orders?"

"Then we're b-busted," says he.

"Huh!" says I.

"We'll git orders," he says, "b-because my prices are *fair*. I'll bet they're l-lower than some. So far 's I kin see," he says, "'tain't any worse to go b-busted sellin' for enough than for too little. One way we're sure to b-bust. The other way we got a chance."

"If we kin git orders," says I, "and if we kin find money to carry us through the next month."

"That's the idee," says he, and you could tell he was a mite worried by the way he took a hold of his cheek and pinched it and jerked at it. He always did that when he was worried, but I never got really scairt till he began to whittle. When Mark Tidd whittled, then things was perty sick.

"That notice of yours comes out in the paper this afternoon," says I. "The one about Silas's debts."

"Uh-huh," says he.

"Well," says I, "what if half the town comes traipsin' in with bills against him? What then?"

'We'll have to f-f-figger to pay 'em somehow," says he.

All the time I saw him looking at two or three of our turners who didn't seem to be very busy. Anyhow, they had time to stand off from their lathes and talk about taxes, and William

Jennings Bryan, and rabbit-dogs, and fishing, and how mean Clem Roberts's wife was to him. Mark kind of frowned and squinted up his little eyes and fidgeted around.

"Makes me mad," says he. "Here we're payin' them men for a day's work, and what do we git? We git just as much work as they feel like doin'. I'll bet them old coots wastes a quarter of a day, and don't kill themselves the rest of the time. We ought to be gittin' about twice as much done as we do—and that would lower costs a heap."

"What you goin' to do about it?" says I.

"I been thinkin'," says he.

"Better think some more," says I; "it's easy."

"I'm a-goin' to, and I'm a-goin' to do it n-now. You tell Tallow and Binney to come up to the office and we'll have a council of war."

I got the fellows and we all went into the office that Mark had got fixed up pretty slick with an old table and some kitchen chairs. It looked real business-like with bookkeeping books and such like scattered around.

"Well," says he, "who's got any n-n-notion of how to make them grocery-store p-politicians work harder?"

"Pay 'em more," says I.

"That won't do it," says he. "I'd be willin' to p-pay more if they'd earn it. But they don't earn fair what they git. They got an idee we're

just kids and they kin do about the way they w-want to."

"Tell 'em," says Binney, "that we won't pay 'em only for what they do."

Mark looked at him a minute. "Say, Binney," says he, "I guess you're promoted. That's a notion. I knew there was somethin'. Piece-work is what they call it. Pay 'em so much for every article they make. So much for a hunderd chair-s-s-spindles, so much for d-drumsticks, so much for d-d-dumb-bells and tenpins."

"They'll quit," says Tallow.

"Maybe," says Mark, "but we got to do somethin'. Let's give it a try."

We waited till noon and the men was all sitting around eating their lunches. Mark and us went up to them, and Mark says:

"Beginnin' to-morrow, we're a-goin' to put this mill on a piece-work basis."

"Eh?" says old Charlie Cobb.

"Piece-work. I got the rates f-f-figgered out. I know how much a turner ought to do in a day, and I based my rates on that. Any man that works l-like he ought to will make what he's m-makin' to-day, and more, and a f-f-feller that really wants to dig in can make a heap more. I don't care if every one of you makes ten dollars a day."

"We won't work no piece-work," says Charlie.

"Why?"

"It's jest gougin' us. We'll have to dum' near kill ourselves, and then we won't make wages."

"Look here," says Mark, "you're turnin' spindles, Charlie. How many d'you f-f-figger you kin turn in a day without b-bustin'? You're a first-class turner."

Charlie thought a minute and then told him. Maybe he bragged a little, because Charlie liked to tell folks what a dickens of a man he was.

"Bet you can't do it," says Mark.

"I kin do it every day for a year hand-runnin' and not sweat a hair," says Charlie.

"How about you other f-f-fellers?" says Mark.

"Calc'late we kin equal anythin' Charlie can do," said Jake Marks. "Charlie hain't no wizard."

"Then," says Mark, "you ought to be p-plumb tickled with my piece-work schedule, for it don't require no sich amount as Charlie says to earn what you're earnin' now. I figgered consid'able lower. So you kin git a day's work done in maybe an hour less, and git the same money for it, or you kin keep right on to work and make a dollar and maybe more than you be."

"I won't do it," says Charlie.

"Why?"

"I jest don't like the idee."

"All right, Charlie," says Mark. "I'm s-s-sorry, because I wanted you to keep on workin' here. When you git your lunch et come up to the office for your p-pay."

"Eh? What? What's that? Firin' me?"

"No. You're quittin'." He turned to the other men as if nothing had happened, and told them how much he planned to pay for what they was making on piece-work rates. "You kin see," says he, "that I aim to be f-f-fair. And more 'n that, I'm goin' to t-tack on a bonus. Every man that t-turns out a full day's work every day will git an extry d-d-dollar Saturday n-night."

They did a little talking among themselves, and then Jake got up and says, "The boys says they'll try it a week, anyhow."

"Good!" says Mark. "Sorry Charlie don't feel that way. I'm goin' to the office now, Charlie. Come along and g-g-git your money."

Charlie he sort of hemmed and hawed, and then he said he guessed maybe he was a mite hasty, and he figgered to stay on with the rest.

"Suit yourself," says Mark, as independent as a hog on ice. "Whatever you say."

Well, next day they went on piece-work, and it was a surprise to me. Maybe it wasn't to Mark, but I was plumb took off my feet when Tallow and Binney turned in their report at night. They was doin' the checkin' up. We had

the biggest day we'd ever had. Mark said he was gettin' all of ten per cent. more for his money than he ever did before. The surprising thing about it was that it kept right up, and even got bigger. Mark said the men sort of felt they was working for themselves, and that it was up to them to stay busy because they wasn't cheating anybody but their own selves when they loafed.

That night Mark's notice came out in the paper, and next day about half a dozen folks come in with little bills, and Mark paid them right up. We was getting all ready to slap ourselves on the back and say that we had been afraid of something that there wasn't any danger in, when, late in the afternoon, who should come stomping into the office but old-man Fugle from up the river.

"I seen your piece in the paper," says he, "so I says to myself, I'll drive in and find out what there is to it, because I'd about giv' up what Silas owed me and was calc'latin' to take it out of his hide one of these days. Not that I could git the worth of my money by lickin' Silas, but it would make me sort of easier in my mind."

"What does Silas owe you?" says Mark.

"More 'n I wisht he did," says old-man Fugle. "Be you goin' to pay it?"

"How much did you say?"

"More 'n his ganglin' carcass is worth for

corned beef," says old-man Fugle. "Dunno why I ever trusted the coot. Might 'a' knowed he wa'n't man enough to run a mill. I says to my old woman the day after I done it that I calc'-lated I'd up and made Silas a Christmas present, but there wasn't no good wishes goin' along with it."

"What does he owe you for?"

"'Cause I was fool enough to trust him," says old-man Fugle. "Next time I'll know bet-ter. I don't see what for you put that piece in the paper and got me 'way in here and then don't do anything about it."

"If you'll t-t-tell me what Silas owes you *for*, and how much he owes you, we kin g-g-git down to b-business," says Mark.

"Hain't I been tellin' you right along? Hain't I been dingin' it into your ears? Say! How many times I got to holler it at you? Be you deef?"

"You m-might tell me once more, in dollars and cents," says Mark.

"I'll tell you. You bet I'll tell you. If it wasn't so much I wouldn't give a hoot, 'cause I could lick him and git satisfaction enough to make up, but I'd have to lick him more 'n sev-enty times."

"At how much a l-lick?" says Mark.

"Eh?" says old-man Fugle.

"How much does Silas owe you?"

"Hain't I been tellin' you? Confound it! where's your ears?"

Mark pushed a sheet of paper at him. "Please write the amount d-down there," he says.

Old-man Fugle scowled at the paper and waggled his whiskers and took a bite out of the pencil. Then he got over the paper so close his nose touched it, and he wrapped his fingers around the pencil so he didn't know whether he was writing with it or with his finger-nail, and made some marks. I could see the paper better than the other fellows, and when I saw what he had put down I felt like yelling "Fire!" and running for home. The figures was two hunderd and seventy-two dollars and sixty-one cents!

He shoved the paper over to Mark, and Mark looked at it and turned kind of pink and sniffed and looked at me. I guess the wind was took out of his sails for once.

"What's—what's this for?" says he.

"For you to pay," says old-man Fugle.

"What did you s-s-sell Silas?" says Mark.

"Logs," says old-man Fugle.

"Call Silas Doolittle," says Mark to me, and off I hustled. I was back in a second, dragging Silas after me.

"Silas," says Mark, "do you owe Mr. Fugle for logs?"

"Why," says Silas, kind of vague and wall-

eyed, "I wouldn't say. Maybe I do and maybe I don't. Seems like I bought some logs off of him, and then again seems like I didn't. What's he got to say about it?"

"He claims you owe him n-n-nearly three hunderd d-dollars."

"Does, eh? Well, I swan to man! Who'd 'a' thought it? Well, well!"

"Do you owe it?"

"Fugle says so, ' Silas says, "and I calc'late if he says so I do. Now I wonder how it come I never paid that?"

"You never had no money," says old-man Fugle. "Be you goin' to pay it now?"

"Ask him," says Silas, pointing to Mark. "He knows."

"We are," says Mark, "but we haven't the m-m-money to-night. We weren't expectin' a b-bill of this size."

"I've come for my pay and I want it."

"You'll have to give us a l-l-little time."

"That's about all I been givin' for a spell back. Can't figger to buy no groceries with time."

"We will pay this," says Mark, "just as s-s-soon as we kin. You won't l-lose a cent. How much t-time will you be willing to give us?"

"Fifteen minutes," says old-man Fugle.

"What's your hurry now? A few days won't make any difference."

"Won't, eh? How d'you know? Guess maybe I know my own business."

"Will you give us a week?"

"No."

"Give us till next Wednesday?"

"No."

"Well, how much will you g-g-give us?"

"I'll give you exactly till Tuesday noon," says old-man Fugle. "If I hain't got the money then, why, I got a offer for this debt, cash money. A feller offers to buy it off of me."

"For how much?"

"Two hunderd dollars."

"You'd lose more than seventy-two d-d-dollars."

"Better 'n losin' the whole shebang," says old-man Fugle.

"Tuesday noon's the best you will d-do?"

"You bet you."

"All right, then. You come Tuesday n-n-noon and your money will be here. Don't sell to Jason Barnes on any account. You read what I said in the p-p-paper?"

"That's why I come here."

"All right, then. Tuesday noon you get p-p-paid in full."

"I'll wait," says old-man Fugle, and out he stamped.

When he was gone we looked at one another

sort of quiet, and then we all looked at Silas Doolittle, who was stepping from one foot to the other like he was standing on something hot. But Mark never said a word to him. When he spoke it was mostly to himself.

"Tuesday noon," says he. "Two hunderd and seventy-two d-d-dollars and sixty-one cents! . . . I guess we got to git a h-h-hustle on."

Somehow I was looking at it about like Mark was. We sure did need to get a hustle on, but I was guessing that the place we would hustle would be out of that mill for good and all, and that Mr. Wiggamore would come hustling into it. It looked to me like our dam was his.

CHAPTER VIII

NEXT morning you would have thought Mark had forgotten all about old-man Fugle and his two hunderd and seventy-two dollars. He never mentioned it, but just took his reports of what we had in stock and went out.

"Where you goin'?" says I.

"Sell some s-s-stuff," says he.

"How?" says I.

"Telephone," says he. "No time to waste. While I'm gone you see if the railroad kin set a car in on our sidin' right away. I want to ship a c-car to-day."

"Who to?" says I.

"How should I know?" says he, "I got to sell it yet."

That was hustling for you, wasn't it? Here he was planning to get a car and have it loaded and ship it when he didn't have a thing sold and didn't know whether he could sell a thing. But he was always a fellow to take a chance when there was a fair show of its amounting to something. I scooted over, and the man in the

freight-shed told me he could set in a car before noon. Then I hustled over to the telephone office to meet Mark. He was just getting the man that owned the big mill in Bostwick on the wire.

"Hello!" says he. "Hello! This is Mark Tidd, of Wicksville. I want to speak to the b-b-boss." He waited a minute, listening. "No, not him," he says. "The man that owns it. Mr. Rushmore." In another minute he spoke again. "Hello! Mr. Rushmore? Mornin', Mr. Rushmore! This here is Mark Tidd, of Wicksville. Remember me?"

I guess Mr. Rushmore remembered him, because Mark went right along talking.

"I got them p-p-prices figgered out. We been manufacturin' r-right along, and we kin ship a car-load to-day. Eh? What's that? . . . Oh, here's the list!" He read off the list of things we could ship and how many of them, and then he give out the prices. "Yes," says he, in a couple of seconds, "it's some b-boost in price, but it's the b-best we kin do. We couldn't sell for a cent l-less and keep in b-business." Another little wait. "All right. T-thank you, sir. We'll ship to-day. . . . How about a c-c-contract? At those prices."

Mr. Rushmore did some talking, and then Mark says:

"Much obleeged, sir. How about dowels?

What's the market price of dowels? I calc'late we can furnish them at the market."

Mr. Rushmore talked some more.

"All right, sir. The machinery is b-bein' set. We can ship a good l-lot in the next car. . . . Good-by." He hung up the receiver and turned to me with a grin. "There," says he, "we've sold our car-load, and we g-g-got a contract with him for all the chair stock we kin make. He'll furnish the turnin' knives and patterns. And he'll t-t-take as many dowels as we kin cut."

"Fine," says I, "but what about old-man Fugle?"

"Got to raise money for him somehow," says he. "F-first we got to r-r-raise that money. I wisht it was done so 's I could give some attention to Jason Barnes. I want to give him about t-two hunderd and seventy-two d-d-dollars' worth of attention. He's got to be showed that it hain't a p-p-payin' p-proposition to meddle with other folks's business."

"You bet," says I. "But how you goin' to raise the money?"

"B-borrow it, if I kin."

"Who of?"

"The b-bank."

"Huh!" says I.

"Other b-business men borrow money of the b-bank," says he, "so I don't see why I can't do it, too."

"Because they won't let you," says I.

"Never t-tell till you try," says he. "Come on."

So we went to the bank, and Mark asked to see Mr. Holmes, who was the president. We went into his office, and Mr. Holmes looked up and smiled and says:

"What can I do for you gentlemen this morning?"

"We want to b-borrow some m-money, Mr. Holmes," says Mark.

Mr. Holmes shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out a quarter. "That enough?" says he. "What security?"

"This," says Mark, serious as an owl, "is b-business. We wasn't calc'latin' to borrow nothin' to buy candy. Here's how it is: You know we're r-runnin' Silas Doolittle Bugg's mill for him, and we're m-makin' a go of it. Yes, sir. We're gittin' it down to a b-business basis, and we calc'late to make money. If 'twasn't for Silas Doolittle, we wouldn't have to b-borrow, but he forgits about seven times as much as he remembers, and one of the things he forgot was that he owed old-man Fugle two hunderd and seventy-two dollars and sixty-one cents." Then he went on and explained to Mr. Holmes how Mr. Wiggamore was tryin' to get our dam away from us, and what he had put Jason Barnes up to do, and all that. "Old-man Fugle has give

us till Tuesday. If we d-d-don't p-pay up then, he'll sell to Jason," says Mark.

"So that's how it is," says Mr. Holmes, and he looked sober and business-like. "You admit you are on the verge of bankruptcy, and come to borrow a large sum of money. Do you think it would be right for me to lend it to you? What if you failed to pay it back?"

"We won't," says Mark. "I know we kin m-m-make that mill pay, but if we fall down on it, I'll p-pay it myself. Yes, sir. I'll guarantee you git your money."

"And I believe you would keep your word," says Mr. Holmes. "I know something about you, young man, and I'd like to help you out, but, really, I don't see how I can. You're not of age, you know, and the law won't let you assume a debt."

"L-look here," says Mark, "lemme tell you how we're gettin' along. This mornin' I got a contract for all we can manufacture, and another contract for dowels that we're goin' to m-make. We got the machinery. Here's the p-prices Silas Doolittle was sellin' for, and here's the prices I've f-f-figgered out was right, and we're goin' to git them on the new c-c-contract. Jest l-look 'em over."

Mr. Holmes looked them over and got sort of interested and asked a lot of questions. Then he says: "This is a good job you've done, young

man. Nobody could have done better. I wish I could find some way to help you—but I don't see how I can do it."

"We're shippin' a car-load of stuff to-day—to Mr. Rushmore, of Bostwick. It 'll come to about six hunderd dollars. But he won't pay for thirty days. We got to have the m-money before that. Now why can't we give you the invoice and b-bill of lading as security, and pay interest to you till Mr. Rushmore sends his check? Then you would have s-s-security and there wouldn't be any chance of your losin'. You kin call Mr. Rushmore on the 'phone and find out if what I say is all right."

"By Jove!" says Mr. Holmes, "I think I could do that! I won't bother to call Rushmore. Your word is good here, Mark Tidd. You've made a reputation for keeping your word and for telling the truth, and it's worth money to you. Some day you'll realize that more than you do to-day. Do you know that a banker is more particular about a man's truthfulness and honesty than he is about his security? Yes, sir. I'd rather lend money to a man who hadn't security, but who had always been honest and fair, than to a man who could give me government bonds as security, but had a reputation for being crooked. Your word is good, and so is young Smalley's here, and Jenks's and Martin's. You four birds flock in a bush mostly, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, just stick to the way you're going and keep on building up a reputation for keeping your word and making a success of things, and some day you will get a big money return on it. . . . I'm glad we found a way to help you out. As soon as you make shipment, and have your bill of lading and invoice, bring them here and I'll have your money for you."

He shook hands with us both and we went out. I was feeling pretty good, I can tell you, and I guess Mark was, too, by the way his eyes twinkled over his fat cheeks. It was a nice thing to have a man like Mr. Holmes say about you, even better than getting the money we needed. But Mark didn't say a word about it, so I didn't.

We went back to the mill, and we four boys and Silas started in to load that car. Believe me, we worked. I never hustled so in my life, and we didn't even stop for lunch. We wanted to have that car loaded for the three-o'clock freight, and we did it. Mark rushed in and made out the bill of lading and the invoice, and along came the engine and grabbed the car, and off she went. Then Mark rushed to the bank with the papers, and Mr. Holmes gave him the money. When he came back he told us Mr. Holmes said we could get money that way whenever we needed it bad. It was a nice thing to know.

We could hardly wait for the whistle to blow

and to get our suppers. Then we went out in a crowd to old-man Fugle's farm, which was about five miles up the river. We rode in Tallow Martin's father's surrey behind their old horse, and he was considerable of a horse, I can tell you. If a volcano was to shoot off right under that horse's feet he might wiggle his ear and sort of look like he wondered if something unusual was going on. Mind, I don't guarantee he would pay any attention to it, but he might. And fast! Whew! You never saw such speed! Why, I've known old Willie—Willie was his name—to start from the corner of Main Street at nine o'clock in the morning, and get to his barn, a quarter of a mile away, by noon! He could do it if he set his mind to it. Sometimes, though, he didn't go in for speed and it would take him all day. Tallow was pretty proud of him and sort of spread over us other kids because we didn't have any horses.

We got out to old-man Fugle's after quite some time, but it was a fine ride. On the way out Mark said we should pretend we was a prairie-schooner crossing the plains, and that there was wild Injuns and buffalo and such like scattered all around kind of promiscuous. The way Mark Tidd could spot Injuns and game was a caution. Us other fellows kept a sharp lookout, but for every Injun we saw and peppered he saw a dozen. Why, doggone it! if he didn't

drag one out from under the seat and scalp him right there! He said the critter had hid there to betray us to his tribe.

It's all right to play such games in daylight in town, but when it gets to be pretty dark, and you're 'way off in the woods and not a soul anywheres in sight—well, I'd just as soon play something else. Before we got to old-man Fugle's I was really seeing Injuns and what not, and the cold chills was a-chasing themselves up and down my spine like they had got up a game of tag. I, for one, was all-fired glad when Fugle's light came into view. We drove up to the gate and about a thousand dogs came boiling out of the yard at us. Old-man Fugle kept more dogs than he did sheep. Judging from some of the mutton that comes from his place, he makes a mistake sometimes and ketches a dog instead of a sheep.

Well, the old man came busting out of his house, dragging a shot-gun, and bellows out to know who is there, and we tell him, meantime keeping our legs tucked up out of reach of his dogs.

"What you want this time of night?" says he.

"We want to g-g-give you some m-money," says Mark.

"Come and give it, then," says he

"Call off them dogs," says Mark.

"They won't harm you," says Fugle.

"You b-bet they won't," says Mark, "not so l-long as I set up here out of reach. If you calc'late to git this money, either come after it or shet up them wolves."

"How much you got?"

"All of it."

"Huh! . . . I'm a-comin'." He came over and kicked about eleven dogs out of the way and stretched up his hand. "Gimme it," says he.

"Gimme a receipt first," says Mark.

"Hain't got no receipt," says old-man Fugle.

"Then you b-better git one if you want this money. We hain't payin' out no cash without havin' s-s-somethin' to show for it."

Well, old-man Fugle grumbled and complained quite a lot, and says we was trying to cheat him, though I don't see how he figgered it, and says he was going to have the law on us, or anyhow get our folks to lick us for being sassy; but finally he went back in the house and brought back a piece of paper he must have been saving up for eighteen or twenty years, with some scratches on it that he said was writing. Mark lit a match and read it over careful, and said it was all right, and handed over the money. Old-man Fugle counted it eleven times, and every time he made it come out different. Sometimes he got six dollars too much, and sometimes he got thirty cents

too little. He kicked up enough fuss to have started a riot with. But after a while he let on he was satisfied, and told us to git out of there and quit disturbing him and let him go to sleep, and we was a measly passel of boys that was coming to a bad end, anyhow. That's the thanks we got out of that old coot for paying him a lot of money.

On the way back Mark says let's play Injun some more, but I put my foot down and says I wouldn't. I had enough Injuns for that night and wanted to play something peaceful and soothing.

"All right," says he. "Let's play we're a band of fugitives a-fleein' from the wrath of a wicked knight that's burned our castle and wants to put us in a dongeon and hack us to pieces with an ax, a finger to a time, till our f-faithful retainers raises a m-million dollars to pay our ransom."

That was his idee of a peaceful and soothing game! Well, we didn't play that, neither, nor anything else. I curled up on my half of the seat and went to sleep. Binney was on the seat with me, and he went to sleep, too, but Mark and Tallow kept awake and drove. Next morning Tallow told me Mark was showing him how to drive all the way, which made Tallow kind of mad, because he thought he was a better driver than the man in the circus that drives the

chariot in the race. He said Mark was inventing new ways to drive, and trying to think up some new kind of a thing to get old Willie to go faster. He wanted to have Tallow hitch old Willie with his nose to the surrey and his tail pointing toward home. It was his idee that Willie could go faster backing up than going ahead.

CHAPTER IX

"NOW old-man Fugle's off our m-m-minds," says Mark Tidd, next morning, "and things is goin' p-perty good here, we got time to give to Jason Barnes."

"Fine!" says I, and Tallow and Binney agreed with me as enthusiastic as could be.

"What's the scheme?" says Tallow.

"Dunno yet. Got to git one up. Anyhow, I don't want to do much till Silas Doolittle gits that d-dowel-machinery to goin'. If he was left alone he wouldn't finish up on it till a year from Christmas."

"Yes," says I, "and what about that other turned stock that's pilin' up in the warehouse? Them drumsticks and tenpins. And perty soon we'll have a stack of bowls, too. Hadn't we better git to sellin' them?"

"I been workin' on 'em," says Mark. "Got a lot of l-letters out now. Ought to hear somethin' right away. If I don't we'll have to git out and h-hustle."

Well, he stood over Silas Doolittle like a hungry cat watching a mouse-hole until

Silas got finished up with the dowel-machinery and it was running. When the little pegs began to come through Mark was satisfied.

"Now for Jason," says he.

"Jason's one of them spirit fellers," says I.

"How's that?" says Binney.

"Believes spooks comes monkeyin' around a feller," says I. "Goes to them mediums and gits to talk to his grandfather's aunt's sister's poodle-dog that died the year of Valley Forge," says I. "And he hears rappin's on the wall, and pencils writes on slates when nobody is around, and sich cunnin' things."

"What's a medium?" says Tallow.

"Why," says I, "you know what a medium is! Anybody knows. I wouldn't let on I didn't know what one was. Folks would think I didn't know much."

"Oh," says he, "is *that* so? Well, if you're so doggone wise, what is a medium? Jest tell me that. Jest say right out what one is, and what it does, and what wages it gits for doin' it, if it's so easy."

"Well," says I, "when you have roast beef, how do you like it?"

"Cooked," says Binney.

"Well done or rare or what?" says I.

"Medium," says Tallow.

"There," says I. "You see."

"I don't see nothin'," says he. "What's roast beef got to do with spirits?"

"It hain't the meat," says I, "but the word. You said 'medium,' didn't you? Well, that's what we was talkin' about."

"Huh!" says he, and sort of scowled. "Medium. That means half-cooked, don't it? It means the meat hain't raw and hain't done. Kind of red-like," says he.

"Well," says I, "that's what a medium is, hain't it?"

"What? Red?"

"Some of 'em is red," says I. "There's Injun spirits. Most mediums I ever heard of is on speakin' terms with a Injun spirit named Laughin' Water."

"What kind of a way is it to call 'red' 'medium'? How would I look sayin' the Brownses' house was medium when I meant it was red? Folks would think I was crazy."

"It don't mean red, exactly," says I.

"Well, then, what *does* it mean?"

"It sort of means 'not quite.' See? Not quite raw and not quite cooked."

"Middlin'?" says Tallow.

"Why, yes," says I, "that's about it! Standin' in the middle."

"Middle of what?" says Binney.

"Middle of a crowd of spirits, of course," says I.

"Well, why in tunket couldn't you have said so right off without so much palaver?"

"I had to explain it to you gradual," says I, "or you wouldn't ever have catched the idea."

"Did Jason ever see one of them spirits?" says Tallow.

"Claims he's seen dozens," says I.

"Was he scairt?"

"Accordin' to his tell he got consid'able chummy with 'em," says I. "He was braggin' up to the grocery how they come and pulled his ears and stuck their fingers down his back and called him by his first name."

"If I was a spirit," says Binney, "I'll bet I could git more fun than pullin' Jason's ears."

"Well," says Mark Tidd, "what you f-f-fellers say if we all turn spirits and do quite a heap more 'n jest p-pull his ears? I'll bet Jason hain't so brash as he lets on with spirits kickin' around. I'll b-bet if he was to meet up with a crowd of 'em unexpected-like, he'd have a conniption fit and fall in the m-middle of it."

"We kin try him and see," says I. "How'll we work it?"

"I'll f-figger it out," says Mark, "and tonight we'll give Jason a t-treat."

"Treat him medium," says Tallow.

"Won't be n-nothin' medium about this," says Mark. "It 'll be done brown."

"We'll dress up in sheets," says Binney.

"We won't, n-neither," says Mark. "Sheets has gone out of style for ghosts. It's what you can't see but kin *feel* and *hear* that scares you m-most. Jest lemme alone awhile and I'll git up a scheme for Jason."

Well, we let him alone, because there wasn't anything else to do. When he was getting up a scheme it wasn't any use to ask him questions or pester him. He never would tell you a word till he made up his mind to, and the more you bothered him the longer it would be before you found out. When he was good and ready you'd get to know.

Mark told us to meet him right after supper, which we did. He had a fish-pole in his hand all covered with black, and a package in his other hand that he didn't mention.

"Thought we was goin' after Jason," says I. "Why didn't you say you was goin' bullhead-fishin'?"

"The b-bullhead we're after," says he, "has got two laigs and he answers to the name of Barnes."

"All right," says I, "but why the fish-pole?"

"You'll see," says he.

"Why's it all wrapped in black?"

"So's he won't see," says Mark, and that is all we could get out of him.

We mogged along slow, waiting for it to get real good and dark, and then we headed straight

for Jason's house. Mostly in the evening you could find him setting on a bench overlooking the river, having a enjoyable time smoking his pipe and swatting mosquitoes. He always sat there, because if he went down to the grocery with the other loafers somebody might borrow a pipeful of tobacco off of him, and it seemed like Jason just couldn't bear to part with nothing for nothing. He was that close-fisted he made the barber spread a paper around his chair when he got a hair-cut, so he could save the hair that was cut off. Yes, sir. And once he took two plank to the mill to be planed, and fetched along a bag to carry home the shavings. Said they was too good kindling to waste.

We got to his house and sneaked around back, but Jason wasn't there. We hid in the lilac-bushes and waited maybe twenty minutes. Perty soon the back door opened and out come Jason on tiptoes, acting like an Injun that was creeping up on a helpless settlement of white folks. He took so much pains to act stealthy that anybody could tell he was up to something. When he went past where we were hiding we saw he had an ax in one hand and a crowbar in the other. He mogged right along past us and begun to scramble down the bank toward our mill.

"Huh!" says Mark. "Wonder what the old coot's up to?"

"Hain't no idee," says I, "but he's headin' toward the mill."

"Shouldn't be s'prised," says Mark, "if it was a l-l-lucky thing we happened around jest when we did. Wait a m-minute and we'll foller in Jason's footsteps."

We waited, and in a minute Mark got up and started right after Jason. When we got to the edge of the bank we could see a dark blob that moved along through our log-yard, and we knew it was him, so down we went, taking all the pains we knew how not to make any sound.

When we got to the bottom Jason was out of sight, but we knew he was there somewheres, and Mark said he wasn't up to any good. I could have told that myself, because nobody goes sneaking onto other folks's property at night with an ax and a crowbar to do him a favor. Not that I've heard of, anyhow.

We went across the race and up to the mill, but we didn't see Jason or hear a sound.

"L-listen!" says Mark.

We all stood as still as could be and listened. Before long we heard a sort of scraping sound over to our right. It sounded like it was pretty close, but kind of muffled.

"Plunk," says Mark, "you crawl over that way and s-see what you kin s-see."

So I got down on all-fours and crept along till I got to the gate that let the water through

to the mill-wheel. It was shut, because we always shut it at night. I hadn't seen or heard anything yet. I kept on till I was right on the edge of the pit where the water-wheel was and craned my neck over. I couldn't see anything for a spell, but sure as shooting I could hear somebody moving around, and in a second a match flared up and I could see Jason sticking out his neck and looking at the wheel. There was a little water down there that seeped through the gate—not much, but a little. It came around his ankles. Now I could hear him breathing hard and kind of muttering to himself.

"Dum' hard way to earn money," says he, soft and low. "But it's good money and don't take long. Hope it don't fetch on the rheumatiz, sloshin' around in this water." Then, after a while he says, sort of shaky, "I never see sich a dark hole." He lighted another match and looked around. Then he picked up his ax and crowbar from where he had rested them against the wall and got nearer to the water-wheel.

I didn't wait for anything else, but went hustling back to Mark.

"He's down in the wheel-pit," says I, "and he's got his ax and crowbar. Now whatever you calc'late he's doin' there?"

Mark was looking pretty mad. "He's doin' a little chore for that man Wiggamore," says he. "He's goin' to see to it the m-m-mill don't run

too good. What would h-happen, Plunk, if our water-wheel was to be smashed?"

"Why," says I, "we'd be smashed, too!"

"You bet," says he. "Well," he says, in a minute, "I dunno 's I ever heard of a more d-d-disagreeable place to meet a ghost than down in a wheel-pit."

With that he undid the package in his hand and showed it to us. It was a rubber glove, kind of whitish-yellow color, and it was stuffed full of something.

"Feel," says Mark.

I took it in my hand and dropped it in a second. You never took hold of anything so cold and clammy-feeling and so *dead*. That's how it felt—*dead*.

"What's the idee?" says I, sort of shivering.

"That," says Mark, "is the g-g-ghost."

"Ginger!" says I.

He took that hand and fastened it to the end of his fish-pole, and then motioned for us to come along. We all got over to the edge of the pit without making a sound, and stuck our heads over. Sure enough, there we could see Jason—just barely see him in the pitch dark, and we could hear him mumbling to himself, pretty nervous and uneasy.

"Wisht it was light," says he. "This hain't no sort of a place for a man to be at night. Nobody knows what's prowlin' around. And a

feller can't do no sort of a workman-like job when he can't see. But I calc'late I kin put that wheel out of business, jest the same. Anyhow, I kin smash off most of the buckets."

He lighted another match and reached for his ax. Just then Mark let out a sound that 'most made me jump into the pit. It was the dolefulest, sufferingest, miserablest moan you ever heard. The hair around the back of my neck curled right up tight, and I hain't ever been able to git the kink quite out of it. Scairt! Whew! Say, I've been scairt a couple of times, but I hain't never seen anything that was a patch on what I felt then. I was just going to scramble up and scoot when Mark grabbed me.

"Set still," he whispered. "That was me."

"Oh!" says I. "Well, don't do it ag'in, or you won't have *me* in the audience. I calc'late I heard about all I kin digest."

"You'll hear worse," says he.

We listened. Jason wasn't making a sound. Jest standing still and letting his knees rattle together, I calc'late. Perty soon he spoke.

"Who's that?" he says, faint-like.

Mark he let out another one of them moans, but this was a better one than the first. It fair made your blood curdle up into hunks.

"Ooo-oo!" says Jason, just like that.

Mark stuck out his fish-pole slow and cautious

with that clammy hand on the end of it, and then, all of a sudden, there was a thin little ray of light that shot out and touched that hand so's you could see it plain, but you couldn't see anything else. It jest looked like a hand a-floating in the air, sort of pale and fleshy and horrible—and it moved straight toward Jason. Mark he let loose another moan.

"*Jason Barnes!*" says Mark, in a hollow, awful kind of voice. "*Jason Barnes!*"

Now the hand was close to Jason and he was a-crowding away from it. His eyes was sticking out of his head about a foot and his mouth was open wide enough to stick that hand right into it. All he could see was that hand and the ghost light that come with it. The light was an electric flash of Mark's. The hand came closer and closer and touched Jason right on the cheek. Well, sir, you never heard such a screech as he let out.

"Go away!" says he. "Don't touch me! What be you ha'ntin' me fer? I hain't never done nothin' to you. Ooo-oo!"

"*Kneel, Jason Barnes!*" says Mark, and down plopped Jason right in that chilly water. "*Kneel and confess.*"

And all that time that clammy hand was a-fumbling over Jason's face. If I'd been him I calc'late I'd have keeled over and give up the ghost right there, but maybe, being one of them

spirit fellers, Jason was sort of familiar with ghosts and wasn't as scairt as I would have been. But he was scairt enough. Come to think it over, I don't see how a body could get much more scairt than he was.

"*Jason Barnes*," says Mark again, "*what—are—you—doing—there?*"

"Oh, Spirit, whoever you be," says Jason, his teeth clattering like clappers, "I hain't doin' nothin'. I was walkin' in my sleep. I hain't a-doin' nothin'."

"*Jason Barnes—confess*," says the voice.

"I— Oh, Mr. Ghost—I come to bust the water-wheel."

"*Why?*"

" 'Tain't my fault. I didn't know any ghosts was int'rested in this mill. . . . I was hired."

"*Who hired you?*"

"Feller named Wiggamore."

"*This is my mill. . . . This is my water-wheel*," says the voice.

"I didn't know. . . . Honest, I didn't know. Oh, lemme git out, Mr. Spirit! I won't never come ag'in. I won't never disturb your property no more."

"*How — much — were — you — paid?*" says the voice.

"Ten dollars," says Jason.

"*Put — it — in — my — hand*," says the voice.

Jason he reached in his pocket and laid a bill

in the hand on the end of the fish-pole, and the hand pulled it back to Mark, who put it in his pocket. Then the hand went back again.

"*I've — been — watching — you,*" said the voice.

"I hain't done nothin'. . . . I didn't know. Oh, lemme go! I won't never do nothin' like this again."

"*This — mill — is — mine,*" says Mark.

"I wouldn't tetch it for a million dollars," says Jason.

"*If — you — do,*" says the voice, "*I—shall — come — for — you.*"

"Jest lemme go and you won't never have no complaint ag'in. How was I to know you owned this mill?"

"*Come out,*" says the voice.

We backed away and crouched down. Jason he come spilling out of that hole without his ax or his crowbar, and stood on the top, shaking like he had a double dose of the ague. Mark reached out with the hand and laid it against his cheek.

"*I — shall — watch — you, Jason — Barnes,*" says the voice. "*Day — and — night — I — shall — watch — you.*"

"You won't have no reason. Honest, you won't. . . . From now on I'm a-goin' to lead a upright life. You won't have no more trouble with me. I promise solemn."

"*If — I — have — to — come — to — you — again* — BEWARE."

"You won't. You never 'll have to come nigh me. I don't never want to see you ag'in."

"*Then — go — home — and — repent*," says Mark. "*Go!*"

Jason went. You never see no such going as he done right then and there. You would have thought he was the prize runner of the county out after the championship of the world. He went so fast he got where he was going a minute before he started. That's the way it seemed. I don't believe anybody ever ran so fast before, and I don't believe anybody ever will again. And he just naturally *jumped* up that bluff. It was the highest jump on record, about seventy or eighty feet or so. I don't know where he stopped, but I do know he never looked back.

When he was out of sight Mark sat down to laugh, and we all laughed some, but we was so mad we couldn't laugh very much.

"Fine way to d-d-do business," says Mark. "Hirin' men to come in and smash your machinery!"

"What you goin' to do with the ten dollars?" says I.

"Come along and s-s-see," says he.

We went into the mill and to the office. There Mark took a piece of paper and wrote a letter

to Amassa P. Wiggamore and this was the letter:

Dear Sir,—Here is ten dollars a ghost took off of Jason Barnes and it belongs to you. Jason left an ax and a crowbar that you can have if you call for them. A man that would pay ten dollars to damage another man's mill like you did hain't fit to eat out of the same trough with pigs. Folks say you are a business man. If this is the way you do business, decent folks would prefer burglars. You've been trying to gouge us out of our mill. Well, you won't do it. Jason's caught. He's confessed. If you try any more of this kind of business you'll be attended to like Jason was. If you want our mill, offer a fair price and we will sell. We hope you will buy something valuable with this ten dollars.

And he had us all sign our names to it.

CHAPTER X

I GUESS you know Zadok Biggs, the little tin-peddler who was always whistling. If you don't you ought to know him, because he knows more than almost anybody else in the world, I guess. That's because he has traveled around a lot on his red wagon, and talked to almost everybody in Michigan. Besides, I think he had quite a lot of brains to start with. He says so, anyhow, and he told us that the only reason he wasn't a judge in the United States Supreme Court was because he was so little. You see, he started out with the idea of being a big man, and he *is* pretty good-sized when he sits down, but as soon as he stands up he's only about four feet. That is a handicap for a judge. Still, Mark Tidd says it is more important what a judge has in his head than in the legs of his pants, and maybe he's right.

Zadok came into town next day and drove right up to Tidds'. He thinks Mark is the greatest boy in the world, on account of his name. Zadok is funny about names. He collects them like some boys do stamps or birds'

eggs, and he says Mark's name, Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, is the best one of the lot.

"Well, well, well!" he said. "What's this I am informed? (Most folks would say 'told.') Runnin' a mill, eh? Now can you beat that? Indeed you cannot. But what would one expect of a boy with a name like Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd? Nothing less. A boy with such a name is bound to be remarkable. What success, Marcus, what success?"

"We're goin' p-p-pretty good," says Mark.

"To be sure. Certainly. You are, as I understand, fabricating ('manufacturing' is the usual word) articles from wood."

"Yes."

"Wooden chopping-bowls, perhaps."

"Yes."

"A good product. A fine thing to make. The market is good now. I am obliged to pay much more for them than I did. I hope your prices have gone up."

"They have," says Mark.

"And are you having any trouble? You always have trouble, do you not? You always meet with opposition—unjust opposition?"

Then Mark told him all about it, and Zadok was as mad as a sparrow that a cat chases away from a pile of crumbs.

"My name, Zadok," he said, "means 'just.' It describes me. I am just by name and just by

nature. Such things as this fill me with wrath. (Most men would say 'make me mad.') What are you doing to this man Wiggamore?"

"The question is what is he doing to us," says I.

"No, no," says Zadok. "Ask Marcus Aurelius if it is. When a man plans to do you harm you do not wait until he does it. No, indeed. Instead, you plan yourself how to avert the calamity. Is that not so, Marcus? And you lay schemes to get the better of that man?"

"That's right," says Mark.

"Zadok will help you. Not that Marcus Tidd needs help, but the brain and the experience of Zadok Biggs are at your disposal. Zadok will look about and Zadok will set his vast intelligence to work. Then an opportunity may present itself. Opportunities are marvelous things, and you are quick to grasp them. A hint, and you see your chance. Be patient, be watchful, and Zadok will give the hint."

With that he went into the house to see Mr. Tidd and Mark's mother and we went to work.

That afternoon a man came up into the mill and we saw him go over and talk to Silas Doolittle. After a while both of them came over to us, and Silas said the man was a Mr. Dwight that was in the woodenware business in the city and an old customer of his.

"I sold him most of my bowls, and he handled

a good sight of drumsticks and dumb-bells and tenpins for me. Seems like I never had very good luck sellin' such things, and Mr. Dwight he used to come over every little while, jest like he's done to-day, and kind of take things off my hands."

"Yes," says Dwight. "I'm always glad to help a friend out. Silas tells me you have quite a little stock in the warehouse. Well, I don't need anything just now, and prices are 'way down and the market is loaded up, but just to be a good fellow I'll take what you've got."

Silas was beaming and happy. He looked like he thought he had done a fine stroke of business.

"Ship 'em to the same address?" says he.

"Yes," says Dwight.

"I'll go and git in a car," says Silas.

Mark looked at him out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't grin or speak sharp or do anything unpleasant. He wouldn't have hurt Silas's feelings for a lot. It wasn't Silas's fault he hadn't any head for business, and he was doing his best. But Mark just says, sort of hesitating-like:

"Jest a m-m-minute, Silas. What p-price was Mr. Dwight offerin'?"

"Why," says Silas, "we didn't say nothin' about price! I know Dwight 'll send us a check for whatever he's warranted in payin'."

"I know he would," says Mark, "but s-s-some-

how I'd rather know jest what he's goin' to p-pay before we ship. What f-figger do you calc'late you kin give, Mr. Dwight?"

"Why, it's like this," says Dwight. "Retail prices is 'way down, and everybody's loaded up with stock. I can't offer as much as I'd like to. You better just send them along, and I'll give you the best price I can when I dispose of the goods."

"Somehow that d-d-don't sound jest right to me," says Mark. "It's kind of uncertain. I think we ought to know jest what you'll p-p-pay."

"Well," says Dwight, "I couldn't offer you as much to-day as I might be able to get for you. I've got to be safe. I couldn't set a price and then sell at a loss. You'd get more by waiting."

"Maybe so," says Mark, "but I'd rather you m-made an offer."

Dwight sort of hesitated a little and hemmed and hawed, but pretty soon he told Mark what he could pay for each kind of goods.

"Um! . . ." says Mark. "That the b-best you can do?"

"It's the best the market will allow me to offer."

"Market's crowded, eh?"

"Badly."

"With bowls in special?" says Mark.

"Yes," says Dwight.

"Um! . . . Good mornin', Mr. Dwight. I don't calc'late we kin do any b-b-business."

"Why not? What's wrong with that offer?"

"It hain't fair," says Mark.

"What—"

"And *you* hain't fair," says Mark, "and I calc'late, jedgin' from what you've tried to do to-day, that you hain't n-never been fair with Mr. Bugg."

"What do you mean, young man? Are you charging me with sharp practice?"

"I'm sayin'," says Mark, in the gentle way he has when somebody's done something to make him think they're cheating him—"I'm sayin' that you've known Silas perty well, and you've made perty good m-money off him. You've come over here a g-g-good many times, makin' b'lieve you was doin' a favor, when you was actually payin' him a lot less than he could git for his goods if he had known what he was d-doin'."

"Now, Mark—" says Silas, in that frightened way of his.

"Young man—" began Dwight again. But Mark interrupted.

"I've took the t-t-trouble to study the market, Mr. Dwight. I know that bowls is s-s-scarce and in demand. I know what p-prices is b-bein' paid, and you're offerin' about half of 'em, makin' b'lieve you're doin' a favor. You

come figgerin' you could t-take advantage of Silas, and that wasn't a very large-sized kind of a thing for a man to do, was it? You took advantage. There's folks would say it wasn't h-honest."

"Look here, now—"

"So," says Mark, "I guess we don't want to t-t-trade with you—not in any circumstances."

"Why not, I'd like to know?"

"Because," says Mark, still speaking courteous and gentle-like, "it don't n-n-never pay to do business with a man you don't t-trust."

"Now, Mark—" says Silas again.

Mark didn't pay any attention. "Here's what the market p-prices of bowls is," says he, and he told Dwight just what every size was bringing. "That's a f-f-fair price, too. I know what our cost is, and that g-g-gives us jest a decent profit. But I wouldn't sell to you, Mr. Dwight, if you was to offer twice that. I jest don't want to have any dealin's with you at all. Good mornin'."

He turned away and went into the office, and Dwight and Silas and the rest of us stood looking after him with our mouths open. Silas he stepped from one foot to the other and fussed with his nose and looked like he wished he could crawl in some place and hide. Dwight looked mad and embarrassed and red in the face, like anybody does when he gets caught at something.

"What's that kid got to do with your mill?" says he to Silas.

"He's the boss," Silas says.

"Do you believe the nonsense he's been telling you?"

"Wa-al," says Silas, looking more scairt than ever, "I'll tell you how it is. I've never knowed that boy to say somethin' that wasn't so. He don't never make no statements he hain't prepared to back up, and he knows more about business than I ever calc'late to know. . . . Yes, I figger what he says was so."

"And you're going to stand for his keeping that stock in the warehouse when you could get rid of it at a fair price?"

"I can't help myself," says Silas. "He's boss. But, Dwight, if he wasn't boss, and he said what he said this mornin', I guess I wouldn't sell. 'Cause why? 'Cause he knows what he's talkin' about whenever he opens his mouth. . . . I got to git out into the log-yard, Dwight. I'm kind of sorry this here happened, because I always figgered you was a kind of a friend of mine. It hain't pleasant to know somebody you trusted has been cheatin' you reg'lar."

Well, Dwight he turned around and went away from there pretty sudden, and he looked like he'd et something that disagreed with him. A man must feel pretty small and mean when somebody catches him trying to play a low-down trick.

Zadok came into the office about the middle of the afternoon, and he was grinning like all-git-out. "Ha, Marcus Aurelius!" says he. "Opportunity spelled with a capital O. Opportunity is everywhere. Always one is under your nose. You have but to see and pluck it. ('Pick' is the commoner word.) I shall not tell you about the Opportunity I have seen, but I shall hint at it. A hint should be enough for you."

"F-fine!" says Mark. "Go right ahead and hint. If there's anything I love it's g-g-guessin' riddles."

"Here's one hint," says Zadok. "Listen carefully: A dam is not valuable to a power company without a power-station."

Mark nodded. "You got to t-t-turn your water-power into electricity, of course," says he.

Zadok looked at us proudly. "There," says he, "did I not tell you? Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd! In a second. He grasps the idea in a second."

"I grasped that one myself," says Binney.

"Yes," says Zadok, "but, now you've grasped it, what do you contemplate doing with it? Eh? Tell me that?"

"Why," says Binney, "I don't know!"

"Do you, Mark?" said Tallow.

"Not yet," says Mark, "but I'm g-g-goin' to study it. I'll find out."

"To be sure. Certainly. That's the thing. He's going to find out, and you may be sure he will find out. Now for hint number two: If you've got to have a thing you can't get along without it. There. How's that for a hint? Can't think of a better one, can you? I don't believe you can. And the best part of it is that those hints are first cousins. They are blood relations. . . . That's all the hints. If you discover their meaning, then you have this man Wiggamore at your mercy. But it will not be easy. It will require work and brains. Marcus Tidd has the brains and you all can work. Now about bowls. And drumsticks. And turned stock. You have a supply in the warehouse, I am told."

"Quite a lot," says Tallow, whose job it is to keep tally of stock.

"And you wish to sell them?"

"To be sure."

"In that case, communicate with the address on this card. It is a good firm, a reliable firm, an honest firm. . . . Now I must be going. Good-by all."

We said good-by and then looked out of the window to see him start off with his red wagon that rattled and clanged and banged with all the tinware inside it and hooked on the outside of it. We watched till he turned the corner and was out of sight.

"Now," says I, "what d'you calc'late he was talkin' about?"

"Haven't any idee," says Binney.

"Power-houses," says Tallow, "and havin' to have things, because if you haven't got 'em you are that much short, and if you got to have 'em and you hain't got 'em, why, you hain't got somethin' that you can't git along without. That's about it, hain't it?"

"You don't say it so's it's very clear," says I.

"Maybe you kin do better," says he.

"I hain't sayin' so," says I. "But there's somethin' important mixed up in it."

"Yes," says Mark. "Zadok always knows what he's t-t-talkin' about."

"Pervidin' he's talkin' about anything at all," says I.

"But he was," says Mark, "and I'm goin' to f-f-find out all I kin about p-power-stations, and see how they match up with havin' to have what you can't git along w-w-without."

"And you better see about sellin' them bowls and things," says Tallow. "Perty soon we'll have the warehouse cram full, and then what?"

"Then we'll have to eat 'em," says Mark.

"I seen Wiggamore come in town this mornin'," says Tallow.

"Um! . . . Wonder what he's up to. Bet it's s-s-somethin' nasty. Tell you what, Tallow, you and Binney skin out and keep an eye on

him. He d-d-don't know you like he'd know me. Stay around as clost to him as possible, and see how much you kin h-hear of what he's sayin'. And remember it. Don't forgit anythin'. You never kin tell when a word will be mighty important. If he talks to anybody, r-remember who it is. Git to hear as much as you kin, and don't lose sight of him a minnit."

CHAPTER XI

JUST before quitting-time Tallow and Binney came back to the mill and we all went into the office to find out what they had found out.

"Where'd you l-leave Wiggamore?" says Mark.

"Hotel," says Binney. "Went up to his room to git ready for supper."

"How'd you git along?"

"Fine," says Tallow. "We found Wiggamore and another man just leaving the hotel, and we walked along right behind. They done a lot of talking about rainfall and dams and power, and then mentioned our dam, and Wiggamore says there was a little difficulty there, but it wasn't worryin' him, 'cause he figgered to be able to git our property about whenever he wanted to. 'What's worryin' me more,' says he, 'is that piece across the river. They call it the Piggins Meadow,' he says. Then he says to the other man: 'That's why I got you down here. I look to you to take care of it. We're going to see Miss Piggins now. I've explained about it before.'

"'Yes,' says the other man.

"Well, we mogged along till we come to Miss Piggins's house, and they went up and rapped on the door. Binney and I walked past, and then come back over the side fence and got under the parlor window, because we knew Miss Piggins would take them in there like she always does partic'lar company. I guess maybe there's three or four folks gets into that parlor in a year. She's awful choice of it. Anyhow, she took Wiggamore in, and we could hear plain what was said, on account of her bein' deef and Wiggamore and his man havin' to holler. Miss Piggins always hollers, anyhow, so we was safe to hear all that was said:

"'Miss Piggins,' says Wiggamore, as loud as he could beller, 'we've come about that land across the river.'

"'Hand across the river?' says she. 'What *be* you talkin' about, anyhow? Hand, did you say?'

"'Land,' says Wiggamore, 'most bustin' his throat.

"'Meadow,' says his friend, yellin' louder than he did.

"'Widow?' says Miss Piggins. 'I hain't no widow. I'm a old maid and I'm proud of it. 'Tain't 'cause I *have* to be, neither. I've had chances enough, goodness knows, but I hain't never seen the man that I'd work and slave for the way wimmin does.'

"She was goin' on at a great rate, gettin' up more steam every minute, and Wiggamore and his friend was lookin' at each other like they wanted to up and hit somebody with a club. But they couldn't stop her. She was gettin' things offn her mind about men, and she was bound to git 'em off. I'll bet she went on for fifteen minutes without takin' a breath. Then she stopped up sudden and says, 'What was you wantin' to see me about?'

" 'Your land,' says Wiggamore so's you could 'a' heard him to Sunfield.

" 'My hand? What about my hand?' Then she sort of giggled and lopped her head over and acted like a kitten that sees a mouse, only don't want to let on it sees it. 'Why,' says she, 'I don't hardly know you, and I hain't had sich a thought in my mind. 'Tain't scarcely usual to come askin' for a lady's hand with company along,' says she.

" 'Sufferin' mackerel!' says Wiggamore. 'She thinks I'm wanting to marry her!' Then he got up and walked over to her real close and yelled in her ear.

" 'I'm married,' says he. 'I've a wife.'

" 'Oh,' says she. 'It's your friend, eh? What's his name? How come he to want to marry me?'

" 'He doesn't,' says Wiggamore. 'We came to talk business. We want to buy your little farm across the river.'

" 'My arm across the river? Be you crazy? My arm hain't long enough to go across no river.'

" 'Farm,' says Wiggamore. 'Land. Pasture. Meadow.'

" 'Oh!' says she.

" 'We want to buy it,' says Wiggamore.

" 'It hain't for sale,' says she.

" 'Everythin's for sale—if you get the right price,' says Wiggamore.

" 'Nice?' says she. 'Why is it nice? 'Tain't nothin' but a field where we turn out the hogs. Nothin' nice about it.'

" 'Price,' says Wiggamore. 'Money.'

" 'It hain't for sale,' says she.

" 'Wouldn't you rather have good money than that old meadow that's good for nothing but to pasture pigs?'

" 'To be sure,' says she, 'but 'tain't for sale.'

" 'Why not?'

" 'It was left to me and my brother George,' says she, 'and I can't sell it without him. Neither kin he sell it without me. We both own it,' says she.

" 'But you would be willing to sell if George would?'

" 'Certain,' says she.

" 'Where's George?' he says.

" 'If you was to tell me that,' says she, 'I calc'late I'd be a heap obleeged. I hain't seen hide nor hair of him this six months.'

" 'He's gone away?'

" 'You might call it that,' says she. 'It was on account of a hog.'

" 'But where did he go?'

" 'Hain't I jest tellin' you I don't know? It was on account of a hog he went.'

" 'What about the hog?'

" 'Why, seems like he come home one night with a hog. It was a fine hog and fat,' says she. 'George he told me he got attracted by that hog and jest had to own it. Well, next day along comes a man lookin' for that hog, and the sheriff was with him. He let on the hog was his and that George jest up and *took* the hog and run off with it. Wa-al, when George seen the sheriff come into the front door, he went out of the back door, and that's the last I've seen or heard of him. . . . Seems like a lot of fuss to be makin' over a hog.'

" 'And you don't know where he is?'

" 'No more 'n I know where General Jackson's aunt's sister's apple butter is kept.'

" 'But couldn't you find him?'

" 'How'd I find him? Tell me that. Stick my head out of the winder and holler? Lemme tell you, when a man up and steals a hog and goes away on account of the sheriff comin' to call, he hain't goin' to be found if he kin help it. George never did think much of sheriffs, and if

you was so much as to mention jail to him, he'd fair have a conniption fit.'

" 'If I fix it up with the man that owned the hog and with the sheriff, will you try to find him?'

" 'You go fix it first,' says she. 'But I hain't the least notion where to look. Maybe he's up and skedaddled for Africa or Chiny or one of them places. He was always talkin' about goin' to see them Chinee folks. Seems like he was a heap int'rested into 'em.'

"Well, Wiggamore and his friend looked at each other and waggled their heads, and got up to go. 'If you hear from George,' says Wiggamore, 'you let me know. We want to buy that piece of land and we'll pay well for it.'

" 'Hain't no well on it,' says she. 'We jest use it for the hogs.'

"Then Wiggamore and the man got out as fast as they could, lookin' like somebody had just stole their dinner from under their noses. They stopped at the gate and used up a lot of language sayin' disagreeable things about George and Miss Piggins, and alludin' to folks that stole hogs and interfered with business.

" 'You got to find George,' says Wiggamore. 'That is your job from this minute. Keep after him and find him. You know as well as I do that we've got to have that land. The engineers say it is the only place where we can put up our

power-house. All the rest of this project falls down if we can't get that meadow.'

"Then they went back to the hotel and went up to their rooms, and here we be."

"F-fine," says Mark. "You done a good job. I should 'a' found out about this before. Zadok found it out p-pretty quick."

"Zadok?" says I.

"To be sure. It's what he was talkin' about. It's the answer to his riddle. Power-house and what a feller's got to have he can't git along without." He stopped a minute, and then says: "Fellers, the most important thing in the world for us r-right now is George Piggins. Yes, sir, we got to find him, and find him b-before Wiggamore does."

"Why?" says I.

"To git that p-pasture."

"What we want with any pastures? We hain't keepin' no hogs."

"Plunk," says Mark, "sometimes you s'prise me. Honest you do. There's t-times when I figger you hain't got enough brains to wad a gun. Listen, if we git s-somethin' Wiggamore's *got* to have, what then?"

"I dunno," says I.

"Why, he's got to have it, hain't he? And if he's got to have it, he's got to p-p-pay for it whatever we ask. Because he's *got* to have it. If we git that meadow we're in a position to

t-trade with him, and make a little money into the b-bargain."

"I guess so," says I.

"Well," says he, "our job is to f-f-find George, and f-find him quick."

"How?" says Binney.

"Not by t-t-talkin' about it," says Mark, "but by l-lookin'. If I know George Piggins he hain't far off. He hain't the kind of a coot to go many m-miles from home."

"Calc'late Miss Piggins knows?"

"No," says Mark. "George would be mighty scairt, and he wouldn't tell her, knowin' how she loves to w-w-waggle her tongue. He'd be afraid of her l-lettin' it out."

Well, that didn't look like much of a job—to find George Piggins. All we had to do was to search the United States and Canada and Mexico and Europe and Asia and Africa and Australia and a few other places for a man that you wouldn't notice much, anyhow. That's the kind of a fellow George was. You could look right at him without noticing him. He just didn't count. He was the kind of man that would steal a hog, and when you've said that you've said quite considerable. George was one of them sloping folks. His forehead kind of sloped back into his hair and his chin sloped back into his collar and his shoulders sloped forward into his neck and his knees sloped in

toward each other. There wasn't anything bad about George even if he did steal a hog. He wasn't the stealing kind, regular, but he didn't ever do a thing in a hard way when he could do it easier, and he probably found it was easier to get that hog by swiping it than it would have been to buy it. He was a regular rabbit except that he couldn't jump. He might fall off of something, but he'd never jump off it. Why, he didn't even have a nickname. Folks called him George all his life, or maybe Georgie. Imagine a grown man being called Georgie! Whew! It's enough to give you a stummick-ache.

And that's the kind of fellow we had to find. If he had been a big man with red hair and a hook nose and that sort of thing, it wouldn't have been so hard. But to find a fellow that you'd pass on the street without realizing that you passed anybody—well, that was different.

"Most likely," says I, "he's burrowing like a rabbit. Bet he hasn't done more than poke his nose out since he hid up."

"One t-t-thing George has got to do," says Mark, "and that's eat."

Mark would be sure to think of that. It was surprising how much his mind turned to eating. Somehow almost any subject you might mention would make him think of grub.

We talked it over quite a spell, but didn't

arrive at any notion of what to do. Then we went home to supper, but we met at Mark's house in the evening and went for a walk.

We went slow down-town, because we weren't heading any place in particular, and we stopped at the pump awhile to listen to Uncle Ike Bond argue politics with anybody that came along. I guess Uncle Ike knew more about politics than anybody in the world, and it's a funny thing to me he never mixed into them and got to be governor or something, but he never did. He said his mission in life was to see that folks caught trains, and that was enough for *him.* There's no telling how many trains folks would have missed if it hadn't been for Uncle Ike, but he was always on hand long enough ahead so that even Miss Pitcher, that was never on time for anything, and always lost her pocket-book just as she was starting out, would have plenty of leeway to get all fixed for going. We didn't stay long, because Uncle Ike swung off into some kind of an argument about what kind of a man ought to be elected constable.

Without having any particular idea where we were heading for, we went up the street, and the first thing we knew we were looking down at the mill and the dam, and we stopped and looked her over kind of proud-like. It does make you sort of proud to look at something you're running yourself. I never thought much of Silas

Doolittle Bugg's mill till I got mixed up with it, but after that it seemed to me like it was one of the biggest and remarkablest mills in the country.

"Fine mill," says I.

"You bet," says Binney. "There hain't many mills like that."

"It's a m-m-money-maker," says Mark, "when it's run r-right." That was Mark, always thinking about the practical end of it.

"Hey!" says Tallow. "What was that?"

"What?" says I.

"I thought I seen something flash down there —like a match or a candle or somethin'."

"G'wan!" says Binney. "Firefly, most likely."

"'Twan't, neither, no firefly," says he. "There—look!"

Sure as shooting, there was some kind of a light, but it didn't look like it was on the ground. It looked sort of up in the air—as if it was somewheres up toward the top of the mill.

"It's flyin'," says Binney.

Mark he didn't say anything, but looked mighty sharp. In a minute the flash came again, and Mark says: "'Tain't f-f-flyin'. It's inside the mill. We s-seen it when it passed a winder or a crack or somethin'. Somebody's p-p-prowlin' around there."

"Let's git the constable," says I.

"Constable n-nothin'," says he. "No tellin'

where that old coot is, and by the time we got him located, no t-t-tellin' what might happen. I'm goin' down there to find out. You kin come or you kin stay."

"I guess," says Tallow, "that if you kin stand it, we kin."

"Got your flash-light?" says I.

"No," says Mark.

"All right," says I, "but I hain't what you might call tickled to death about skirmishin' around that mill in the pitch dark. There hain't even a moon."

"All right," says Binney. "You wait here."

That made me mad. "I guess," says I, "if a little runt like you kin monkey around in the dark without swallerin' his Adam's apple, I kin do about as well," and I started off ahead of them just to show them that I had as much sand as anybody.

"Hold up!" says Mark. "Don't go p-p-plungin' down there like a buck sheep. Go cautious. We want to sneak up without bein' seen. Here's the idee. That there is a haunted castle where there's a wicked magician l-l-livin', and he's goin' to cast some kind of a spell on the king we're workin' for. We got jobs with a king to p-pertect him from all evil. See? And we got word this here m-magician is up to somethin' underhand. Maybe he's goin' to turn the king into a statue made out of lard or somethin', and

then run off with the p-p-princess and swipe the kingdom. Now, we hain't got no magic, so all we kin do is sneak up on him when he hain't lookin' and grab him before he can make any magic passes and gag him before he can utter any magic words. That's the notion. When we got him tied up and bound and all t-t-that, we kin lock him in a dungeon with n-nothin' to eat but bread and water till the magic is starved out of him."

"Kin you starve magic out of a feller?" says Tallow.

"You kin s-s-starve 'most anythin' out," says Mark.

"All right," says I. "Let's git at it. That king may be turnin' to lard this minute, and what good is a king that hain't nothin' but a lump of lard?"

"Use him for pie crust," says Tallow, who wasn't much on imagining things.

Well, we moseyed down to the mill.

"We'll s-s-separate into two parties," says Mark. "Plunk and me will go up the log-slide at this end of the m-m-mill. Tallow and Binney kin come in from the other end. That way we'll catch him between us."

So we done that. Mark and I crept cautious around to the log-slide and went up it, and it was a job for a cat in that darkness. Once we was inside the mill it was a lot worse. I've been in

the dark once or twice, but that's the first time I was ever in dark that was so dark you had to push it away from you. Honest, I could reach out and grab chunks of it, and it felt like it would pack like snow.

When we got inside we stopped and listened, but there wasn't a sound.

Then Mark whispered in my ear: "Go along s-soft. That there magician's got ears like a cat."

"Kin he see in the dark?" says I.

"You bet," says he.

"Wisht I had that gift," says I, for just then I banged my shin against a timber and it hurt like all-git-out.

We knew that mill pretty well by heart, and found our way around without falling down any holes or sitting down on any saws. Pretty soon I heard a soft, stealthy kind of a noise right over in front of me, and I grabbed Mark's arm. Mark heard it, too, because he reached out and touched me, as much as to tell me to keep still. Then we went ahead. Pretty soon I reached for Mark and I couldn't touch him. I couldn't hear him. Well, if you think that wasn't a lonesome feeling I'll eat a brick.

But I was in for it, and I wasn't going to turn tail and scoot if that mill was so crowded with magicians that they was stepping on one another's toes, so I went ahead a step at a time, stopping to listen about every minute.

Then I felt that something was close to me. Now if you've never been in the dark and had that feeling, why, you don't know what it is to be scairt. I *knew* something was there and that it was alive, and I wondered if whatever it was knew that I was there and if it was getting ready to pounce on me. I hardly breathed. Then I heard just the barest *scrape*. It was moving, and it wasn't more than five foot away. I didn't move. It come closer and closer and closer. Well, sir, I had about all I could stand. Then something brushed right against my arm and I grabbed.

I had to grab. That was all there was to it. Whatever it was grabbed back. It was somebody alive; anyhow it felt alive, especially when it swatted me right in the stummick. That made me mad and I kind of forgot about being scairt and started in to git even. I didn't even think of hollering for help to Mark Tidd.

The other fellow didn't make a sound, and I didn't. We went down on the floor and rolled over and over, each trying mighty hard to git the other, and both doing a pretty good job. I know I was being all mussed up and I'll bet the other fellow wasn't happy. Not if many of the licks I aimed at him landed.

Then I got him down and plumped onto him hard. He was panting, but when he see he was licked he sort of wheezed:

"Tallow—help."

Well, I wanted to slam him in the nose. "Binney Jenks," says I, "what in tunket d'you mean? Why didn't you say who you was?"

"Why didn't you?" says he.

"Anyhow," says I, "I'll bet you wasn't as scairt as I was."

"I was scairter," says he. "And you've mauled me fierce."

"I hain't what you could call neat and in order," says I.

And then somebody touched me on the shoulder and says, "Keep s-s-still." It was Mark Tidd.

We searched all over that floor in the dark and didn't find a thing. Then we started up to the kind of attic above, and just as we was going up the stairs we saw a flash of light again. It was up there.

Well, there wasn't anything to do but go along, so we did. Binney stumbled on the steps and made a noise like two freight-engines coming together. The light skittered just once, and then went out, but we heard a rustling that sounded sort of like rats running inside partition walls. You know that kind of a sound.

There wasn't any use being cautious any more, so we jumped up there as fast as we could, and went plunging every which way in the dark. I guess we felt over every inch of that place,

but not a thing did we find. We even went down to the office and got some matches and searched with them. But not a hide or a hair of a magician or anybody else did we discover—not until we were just ready to give it up. Then Mark stooped over and picked up something.

"Any of you d-d-drop this?" says he.

We all looked at it. It was one of them curved-bladed pruning-knives. It didn't belong to any of us.

"The handle's warm," says Mark. "Somebody's had it in his hand or his p-p-pocket, and not long ago."

It was like he said, so we hunted some more, but there wasn't a soul. Whoever had been there had vanished like he was a fog.

"That's the way magicians does," says Mark. "He's put on his invisible cap. Most likely he's s-s-standin' right here lookin' at us this minute."

We stayed around awhile longer, because we hated to give up, but after a while we saw it wasn't any use, so we went home. But we all felt kind of queer. It was a mighty funny thing —that magician disappearing like that—with no place to disappear to.

CHAPTER XII

NEXT morning we made a pretty careful search of the whole mill, but we didn't find anybody, and nothing had been damaged. The only thing we could think of was that somebody must have been sent in there by Wiggamore to smash something up, but had been frightened away by us. The thing that had us guessing was where he vanished to. He had been in that place up-stairs when we went up, and he must have been there when we were. He didn't go down the stairs, because Binney never left the top step and nobody passed him. I guess he was a magician, all right, whoever he was. It sort of worried us, but there didn't seem to be anything we could do about it except keep our eyes open.

Mark said right off, as soon as we got a minute to spare, that the thing for us to keep in mind was George Piggins. He said it wasn't "Pike's Peak or bust" with us, but "George Piggins or bust," and he let on he didn't look with no special pleasure on busting. I guess nobody else would that was any place around him.

There was too much of him to bust. If he did it he'd be spread all over a couple of counties.

"Well," says I, "let's start looking for George. I'll begin by lookin' in the jail and under my bed. If he hain't neither of those places I'm hanged if I know where he can be."

"Plunk," says Mark, "that come clost to bein' f-f-funny. I 'most laughed right out."

"It was funny," says I. "Trouble with you is you hain't been brought up to see a joke."

"Maybe," says he, "I can't see a j-joke that *is*, but I'm perty average sure to see when one hain't. And that one," says he, "was a star m-member of the Hain't family."

"All right," says I, "you spring a joke and see how you make out."

"When I s-spring one," says he, "it 'll be a joke, you can bet. I won't just shoot off somethin' on the chance somebody 'll laugh. I'll study over it some, and kind of try it out in my mind, and maybe repeat it out loud to myself a couple of times to see how it sounds when I say it. That's the way to do with jokes. Jokes is like dollars. A good dollar is worth a hundred cents, but a bad dollar is apt to get you s-s-shut up in jail. Or eggs," says he. "You don't have to crack a joke to tell if it's bad, like you do an egg."

"I suppose," says I, "*that* was a joke?"

"There's folks would call it sich," says he.

"Aw, come on," says Binney. "Quit your jawin' like old wimmin at a knittin'-bee and git to work. What's goin' to be done?"

"I wisht I knew," says Mark.

"If we found him he wouldn't come back," says Binney. "He'd be afraid of the sheriff."

Mark slapped his leg. "There's somethin' for us to d-d-do," says he. "We kin fix it so George dast come back."

So he sent Binney after the mail, and Tallow to order in a car to make a shipment, and him and I went off to see the deputy sheriff, whose name was Whoppleham. Mostly you could find him down by the blacksmith shop pitching horseshoes. He was about the best horseshoe-pitcher in the county. He was there, all right, pitching with old Jim Battershaw, and they was down on their knees measuring from the peg to a couple of horseshoes with a piece of string to find out which was the nearest, and quarreling about it as if it was the most important thing that had happened in the world since Noah built his ark. We waited for them to decide which horseshoe was nearest, but they couldn't decide, and they wouldn't call it even. I calc'late they'd have gone for the county surveyor to measure them up scientific if just then Battershaw's setter-dog and Whoppleham's shepherd-dog hadn't got tired of waiting and started an argument of their own. It was quite

considerable of an argument, and it come swinging and clawing and snarling right across the lot to where the horseshoes was and settled down to business there. The way them dogs clawed into the ground and kicked up the dust was a caution, and old Battershaw and Whoppleham dancing around the edge of it, hollering like all-git-out and trying to stop it.

Well, all of a sudden the setter give up the ship and tucked his tail between his legs and scooted, with the shepherd after him lickety-split. When they was gone and we looked at the peg and the horseshoes there wasn't anything left to argue about. Those dogs had kicked them galley west and come nigh to digging up the peg. It was a fine thing for both those men, because it gave them something to argue about all the rest of their lives, with no chance of having the argument settled. I'll bet that in ten years they'll still be slanging and sassing each other about that game, each of them insisting his horseshoe was the nearest. That's the kind of old coots they are.

Well, it gave Mark his chance to speak to Whoppleham, and he done so.

"Mr. Sheriff," says he, "kin I s-s-speak to you for a m-minute?"

"I'm busy," says the sheriff.

"This is official b-b-business," says Mark.

"Oh! . . . Hum! . . . Official, eh? Some-

body been breakin' the law hereabouts? Out with it, young feller. Sheriff Whoppleham's the man for you." He pointed down to the star on his suspenders and says: "The people has confidence in me, I guess, or they wouldn't never have put me into this here position of trust and confidence. I guess they knew who would be able to clean out the criminals of these parts. They knowed a venturesome man when they seen one, and a man that wouldn't stop at nothin' in the int'rests of justice. What crime's been did, and who done it?"

"We want to s-s-speak about George Piggins," says Mark.

"Have you seen that there crim'nal? Eh? Where's he hidin'? I know he's dangerous and desprit, but be I hesitatin'? Be I timid? I guess not. Sheriff Whoppleham would be willin' to face Jesse James and drag him to jail by the whiskers. Lucky for them Western bandits I never went out there to mix in. I'd have cleaned 'em up perty quick."

"We don't know where he is," says Mark, "but we want to talk to you about f-f-fixin' up that hog-stealin' so he can come home and not be molested."

"Fix it? How?"

"Well, Mr. Hooker's got back his hog and no harm's been done. We f-f-figgered maybe you would be willin' to call it square and let George

come home if he promised never to do it again."

"Huh!" says the sheriff. "What's everybody so doggone int'rested into George for, all of a sudden? Nobody was excited about him none a spell back, but now it looks like everybody seen all to once that there wasn't no harm in him and he ought to be let home without havin' to suffer for bein' a miscreant. What's the meanin' of it?"

"Has somebody else been to see about him?" says Mark.

"I should smile," says the sheriff. "Why, this mornin' there was a reg'lar delegation, and who d'you s'pose come along with them but Hooker himself? Yes, sir. And they wanted the charge should be dropped and George let home. I says to 'em that my job was ketchin' dangerous crim'nals, not pardonin' 'em, and that they'd have to thrash it out with the prosecutin' attorney. So they went off to do that. . . . What I want to know is, how do they expect a officer of the law to do his duty and bring crim'nals to justice if folks goes around gettin' 'em let off by prosecutin' attorneys? How? Eh? Well, then. They're cuttin' into my trade, that's what, and I hain't goin' to stand for it. I'm goin' out to ketch George Piggins before he gits pardoned, that's what I be, and I'm a-goin' to drag him to jail dead or alive. When I git

him there they can do like they please, but *my* duty 'll be did."

Well, we saw there wasn't any good hanging around there, so we went along, and Mark was looking pretty serious.

"Wiggamore means b-business," says he. "He hain't lettin' any grass grow under his feet, is he?"

"Calc'late it was Wiggamore that tried to get George out of trouble?"

"Of course it was," says he, "and he'll do it, too. Well, let him. That saves us the t-trouble. While he's botherin' with that, we can be l-lookin' for George."

"I wonder if Miss Piggins knows where he is?"

"'Tain't likely," says Mark. "I don't b'lieve it, but we kin keep an eye on her. George was always a powerful hungry f-feller, and if she knows and he's anywheres around, we'll see her sneakin' out with a basket of grub."

"She'd do it at night," says I.

"Yes," says he.

"So there's nothin' for us to do but wait," says I.

"You n-never make no money waitin'," says Mark. "We got to be d-d-doin' somethin'."

"We'll be kept busy to-day loadin' that car."

"Yes, and if we g-g-git an order for bowls and

things from that firm Zadok told us about, why, we'll be busier 'n ever," says he.

So we went back to the mill, and Binney was there, and so was Tallow. The mail had come and there was a letter giving us an order for bowls and turned stuff and asking us to ship at once. Mark said the prices was as good as he expected, and better, and that if we could keep on getting such prices we would make a nice lot of money.

"How about a car?" he says to Tallow.

"Can't git none," says Tallow.

"Why can't we git one? We got to git one."

"Nobody in Wicksville can git one, nor nobody on this branch, seems like. Somethin's happened somewheres and there hain't no cars, and if there was we couldn't have any, because the railroad has let on to the agent here that he dassen't accept any shipments to the city. He said it was an embargo."

"Embargo," says Mark, "I wonder what one of them is?"

"Why," says Tallow, "an embargo means when the railroad won't let you ship to a place or from a place or somethin' like that."

"How long is it goin' to l-last?"

"Maybe a week, maybe a month, maybe all the year," says Tallow. "There hain't enough cars to go around, and the railroad yards in the city is crowded with cars that they can't git men to unload, and that kind of thing."

"Hum!" says Mark. "Perty kettle of fish. Embargo. How in tunket be we g-g-goin' to send out stuff, then, I'd like to know?"

"We hain't goin' to," says Tallow.

"But we g-got to. We jest *got* to."

"They won't let us."

"There must be some kind of a way. We got to ship as f-f-fast as we manufacture, and get the money back, or we can't pay the men and keep goin'. If we was held back from shippin' for two weeks we would be b-busted."

"And Wiggamore would get the dam and the mill," says I.

"He hain't got 'em yet," says Mark, "and he hain't g-goin' to get 'em."

"What 'll we do," says I, "drag our chair stock and bowls and things around in carts? It would take quite a spell to git a car-load to the city, or even to Bostwick, that way."

"I don't know *how* we're goin' to do it, but we're goin' to. You f-fellers git to work and I'll go and f-figger on this. We got to hit on some scheme, and we got to hit on it right off. These here goods has got to be shipped immediate, because we got to have the money."

So he went and sat down in the office, and I could see him pinching his cheek and pulling his ear like he always does when he is puzzling out something. He kept at it more than an hour, and then I saw him come out and get a piece

of wood and take out his jack-knife to whittle. At that I got scairt, for he never whittles till he's in the last ditch. When everything else fails he takes to his jack-knife, and when he does that it's time to get worried.

He whittled and whittled and whittled, and nothing come of it. You see, he hadn't ever had any experience with railroads, and he didn't know what kind of a scheme would work with them.

He didn't go home to dinner, but just called to me to stop at his house and fetch him a snack. I knew what a snack meant for him, so I fetched back three ham sandwiches and three jelly sandwiches and two apples and a banana and a piece of apple pie and a piece of cherry pie and a hunk of cake and about a quart of milk. He went at them sort of deliberate and gradual, but the way they disappeared was enough to make you think he was some kind of a magician. Before you knew it the whole lot was gone and he was looking down into the basket kind of sorrowful.

"What's the m-matter, Plunk?" says he. "Was they short of grub at home? Seems like the edge hain't hardly gone offn my appetite."

"You've et enough to keep me for a week," says I.

"Huh!" says he. "Well, a f-feller kin think better when he's hungry, they say."

Hungry! I swan to Betsy if he hadn't et a square meal for three grown men.

He went to whittling again. About three o'clock he come out and says, "Plunk, we got to go to the city."

"What for?" says I.

"To git f-freight-cars," says he.

"And fetch 'em home in our pockets, I s'pose," says I.

"Maybe," says he. "Git enough clothes to stay all night. We'll catch the five-o'clock t-train."

"But what you goin' to do?"

"I hain't sure. But there's somebody up to those head offices of the r-r-railroad company that's got a right to give us cars. I'm goin' to f-f-find out who it is, even if it's the President of the United States, and I'm goin' to find some way to make him give 'em to us."

"They wouldn't ever let a couple of kids in to see the head men," says I.

"They will," says he.

"How d'you know?" says I.

"Because," says he, "I'll make 'em."

"Don't bite off more 'n you kin chaw," says I.

"Look here," says he, "are you g-g-goin' to lay down on this job? Because if you be I kin take Tallow or Binney. They won't git cold f-f-feet."

"I'll stick," says I, "but we hain't got a chance."

"Anybody's always got a chance," says he. "Folks can make chances. Anything that's p-p-possible kin be done if you stick to it and use your head. This here is p-possible and it's necessary. I'm goin' to git them freight-cars."

That was just like him. You couldn't scare him and you couldn't discourage him. He would stick to anything till you sawed him loose. I guess maybe there was some bulldog in him, or something. Maybe he had had a meal of glue some day and that made him stick to things. I don't think I've ever seen him when he showed that he was discouraged, and I really don't believe he ever was discouraged. No, sir; he got so interested in trying to do whatever it was that he wanted to do that he forgot all about how hard it was. And I guess that's a good idea.

CHAPTER XIII

I LIKE to ride on the cars pretty well, and so does Mark. There are always such a heap of things to see out of the window, and such a lot of different kinds of people right on the cars. It was about four hours' ride to the city, but it didn't seem half that long, and I was sorry when we got there. It was pretty dark when we walked out of the depot into the street.

"Now what?" says I.

"B-bed," says he.

"Where?" says I.

"Hotel," says he.

"There's one," I says, pointing right across the street, so we took our satchels and went over. There was a fellow behind a counter, and when we came up he sort of grinned and says good evening.

"How much does it cost to sleep here?" says Mark.

"Two dollars and a half is our cheapest room."

"For both of us?"

"I guess I can make it three and a half for two."

"I g-guess you can't," says Mark. "The way I look at it, no two boys can do three d-d-dollars and a half worth of sleepin' in one night. Hain't there no cheaper places?"

"Lots of 'em, young man. There's a tramps' lodging-house down the street where you can stay for ten cents."

"Um! . . . Well, I calc'late what we want is somethin' betwixt and between. Somethin' where we kin stay for about a dollar apiece."

That seemed like an awful lot to spend just for sleeping. Why, in the morning our two dollars would be gone and we wouldn't have anything to show for it. It seems like when you spend money you ought to *git* something. I nudged Mark and says to him that it was cheaper to stay awake, and we could use our dollars to-morrow to buy something we could touch. But he says we got to sleep to be fresh for business.

"I'll tell you," says the man behind the counter. "I've got a little room without a bath, and if you can sleep two in a bed, you can have it for two-fifty."

"All r-right," says Mark. "Kin we have breakfast here?"

"If you've got the money to pay for it."

"Um! . . . But there's places where we can git g-g-good grub cheaper 'n you sell it, hain't there?"

"Why, yes! There's a good serve-self lunch up the street where you can get a lot to eat for fifty cents. Say, what are you kids up to? Running away from home?"

"Not that you can n-notice," says Mark. "We're here on b-business. We come to see the p-president of that railroad across the street."

"Oh," says the man, and he laughed right out. "You come to see him, did you? Was he expecting you?"

"No."

"Um! . . . Well, from all accounts, he's a nice man to see—I guess not. They say he eats a couple of men for breakfast every morning. He keeps a baseball-bat on his desk, and hits everybody that comes to see him a lick over the head. I see him every little while, and, believe me, I'm glad I don't have to mix in with him any. I expect he's the grouchiest man in town."

"Sorry to hear it," says Mark, "but I guess we kin m-make out to git along with him s-somehow."

"Want to go to your room?"

"Yes."

Well, a boy with a uniform picked up our satchels and showed us into the elevator and then went into our room first and lighted the lights. Then he sort of stood around and eyed us like there was something he wanted to say, but

he didn't say a word. We looked at him right back, because we weren't going to let on that we cared a rap what any kid with a uniform on did or said. Pretty soon Mark says:

"Well, was there anythin' you was n-needin'?"

"Huh!" says the kid.

"What you hangin' around for, anyhow?"

"I guess you hain't traveled much," says the boy.

"It hain't p-p-part of your job to tell us, is it?"

"Did you ever hear of a tip?" says he.

"Tip?" says Mark.

"Most generally gentlemen gives us bell-boys a tip when we carry their bags to their room," says he.

"Tip of what?" says I. "I hain't got no tip unless it's the tip of my nose."

"A tip is money," says the boy.

"We hired this here room for two dollars and a half, didn't we?"

"Yes," says he.

"We didn't make no b-bargain with you about carryin' satchels, nor with the man at the counter, did we?"

"No," says he. "Nobody does. But everybody gives tips. You *got* to give tips."

"Hain't you p-paid wages for doin' what you do?"

"Yes, but they hain't enough."

"Then," says Mark, "you ought to make the hotel raise your pay and not go t-t-tryin' to gouge it out of folks that stays here."

"Everybody does it," says the boy. "You can't never git nothin' done in a hotel if you don't tip."

"Do you git a tip every time you carry a satchel?"

"Yes."

"Now you look here. I got an idee you're tryin' to git somethin' out of us 'cause we're kids and come from Wicksville. I'm g-g-goin' to f-find out. If it's the custom, why, I'll give you a tip 'cause I want to do what's right. But if you're t-tryin' to do us out of money, why, you won't git it. I'm goin' to ask the man behind the counter."

And that's what he done. He went right down and asked, and the man laughed like all-git-out and told Mark all about tips, and Mark told *him* what he thought about them, and then he give the boy a dime and we went to bed.

We went to sleep in a minute and it seemed like it wasn't more than a minute before we was awake again. Mark woke up first and gouged me in the ribs till I woke up. Then we dressed.

"It's f-five o'clock," says Mark. "We want to git our breakfast and hustle. You kin bet a man with a big job on a r-r-railroad is down to

work early. He'd have to be. Maybe we kin s-see the man we want about six o'clock and git an early train home."

So we went to a serve-self place where you didn't eat off of a table, but off of the arm of your chair, and we et quite a good deal and it was good. Then we came back to the railroad station and it was just six o'clock. There wasn't many folks around, but we found a man in a uniform and Mark asked him who was boss of all the freight-cars. The man told him he guessed the general freight agent was, and Mark says, "Where's his office?"

The man told him and Mark went there with me. It was shut up tight. We waited and kept on waiting, and in about an hour a man came along with overalls and a cap that said something on the front of it.

"Hey, mister!" says Mark. "We're waitin' to see the general freight agent. What's the m-m-matter with him? Is he sick or somethin'?"

"Him!" says the man. "No, he hain't sick. What makes you think he is?"

"'Cause he hain't down to work."

"Did you expect to see him at seven o'clock in the mornin'?"

"To be sure."

"Well, you come back again about nine and maybe he'll be here by that time. He usually gits around about nine."

"Nine," says Mark. "Why, that's 'most n-noon."

The man let out a laugh.

"How long does he work in the afternoon?" says Mark.

"Oh, he goes to lunch about one o'clock, and gets back around half past two, and then he sticks to the job maybe till four."

"Honest?" says Mark.

"Honest," says the man.

"Well, I'll be dinged!" says Mark. "And they pay him a r-r-reg'lar day's wages for that? Him workin' maybe five hours a day?"

"If you got his salary, kid, you could buy a railroad for yourself."

The man went along, and we kept on waiting, but Mark couldn't get it out of his head how a man with an important job could hang onto it and do such a little mite of work. He said he guessed maybe he'd get him a job like that some day where he just had to work five hours. He said he'd do all that work in a stretch and then go out for dinner, and in the afternoon he would have him another job just like it, and work ten hours a day and make twice as much. I thought that was a pretty good idea myself.

It was all of nine o'clock when that man came, though there was folks working under him that came a little earlier. We kept asking if he was there until a man told us we was a doggone

nuisance and that the boss wouldn't see us, anyhow. And that's just what happened. When he got there we asked if we could see him, and the man that was near the gate in the office asked what our business was, and we told him, and he said we couldn't bother the boss with it. Mark said he guessed maybe the boss better be told we was there, anyhow, and after quite a lot of fuss the man went and told him, and then came back to say the boss was busy and couldn't see us. He told us there wasn't any use hanging around, because we wouldn't ever get to see him.

That looked pretty bad, and Mark was as mad as could be. He said we had a right to see that man, and that it wasn't decent or good business for him to refuse to see us. But that didn't mend matters. We could git as mad as we wanted to, but that wouldn't get us a minute's talk with the freight agent.

"I'll b-bet there's somebody kin m-make him see us," says Mark. "The p-p-president of this railroad's a bigger man than the freight agent, and we'll git him to fix it for us."

I says to myself that if we couldn't get to see one it was mighty funny if we could get to see the biggest man of all; but Mark was bound to try, so we found out where the president's office was and went up there. It was half past nine and he wasn't to work yet.

"When 'll he be here?" says Mark.

"Maybe ten o'clock," says a man that was working outside the president's door.

"Ten," says Mark, "um! . . . And how long does he stay?"

"Oh, he'll be around maybe till one, and then he gets lunch and you can't tell how long he'll be out. Then he goes home mostly about three or half past."

"Goodness!" says Mark to me. "I hain't goin' to be any f-f-freight man. I'm goin' to be a p-p-president. Looks like he only works three hours, and maybe he gets p-paid three or four thousand dollars for it. Why, any feller could have three jobs like that, workin' one right on the end of the other, and doin' nine hours' work a day! I could git rich doin' that."

So we waited some more, and after a while in come a slender man with white hair and a cane, all dressed up like he was going to a party instead of coming to work. Everybody acted like they was afraid of him when he came in, and pertended to be mighty busy. He didn't speak to anybody, but just marched through into his own room and scowled like anything. He looked like he was a regular man-eater.

"Was that him?" says Mark.

"Yes."

"Well, will you tell him that I want to t-t-talk to him?"

"Who are you and what do you want?"

Mark told him.

"I dassen't bother him with that," says the man. "He looks savage to-day. He might discharge me right off."

"But I've got to see him. It's important. It's awful important."

"I'll try it," says the man, "but there isn't a chance."

So he went to the door and rapped and put in his head. We heard a man roar.

"Get out of here!" he bellowed. "Shut that door! Get out! I won't see anybody this morning! Understand? Get out and stay out!"

The man came back and says, "There, you see."

We did see, all right, and I was discouraged. Maybe Mark was, too, but he didn't show it. He just looked madder than ever.

"I'm goin' to s-s-see that man," says he, and we went out of that room into the long corridor. There we stopped and stood looking out of the window.

In about two minutes Mark says, "Dast you t-t-try it, Plunk?"

"Yes," says I. "What?"

"Look at that fire-escape. See how it goes along right past that room we were in. The p-president's office is next and it goes p-p-past his window. We kin git in that way."

"He'd throw you off into the street," says I.

"He couldn't l-lift me," says he, and grinned.

"Well," says I, "I'm willin' to go second if you'll go first."

"Come on," says he.

In two jerks of a lamb's tail we pushed up the window and got onto the fire-escape. Then we skittered along it, ducking past windows as quick as we could, until we were in front of a window that we judged was in the president's room. We looked in. Sure enough, there he was leaning back in his chair and scowling and smoking like a chimney. His window was up a little from the bottom, but not enough for us to get in. We stood and watched him a minute. Then Mark says, "Here goes."

He rapped loud on the window and then pushed it up.

"Good m-m-mornin'!" says he. "Kin we come in?"

The president looked at us like he was seeing spooks or something, and rubbed his eyes and jumped up, and Mark says:

"Don't be scairt. We hain't f-f-figgerin' on hurtin' you."

With that both of us got into the room and walked over toward him. He didn't say a word, but just stared and scowled.

"We come to see you on b-b-business," says

Mark, "but they wouldn't let us in. We had to see you, so here we are."

"I see you're here," says he, sharp and savage. "Now let me see you get out again. Quick!"

I was ready to turn tail and skedaddle, but not Mark. He walked right over to that president just like he was anybody common and says:

"I'm s-sorry, sir, if we b-bother you. But I've *got* to t-talk to you a minute. We can't get to see anybody, and if we can't get f-fixed up we are goin' to bust."

The man scowled worse than ever and took a step toward Mark, but Mark never give back an inch.

"I'll have you thrown out," says the man.

"If you say you won't t-t-talk to us," says Mark, "and if you can feel down in your heart that you're doin' right, why, we'll go without b-bein' thrown. But we was sure that a man couldn't get to be p-president of a whole railroad unless he was fair and square. That's why we come right to you. We sort of had confidence, sir, that you was goin' to see that what was right was done. . . . But if you don't feel that way about it, why, we'll be g-g-goin' along."

He turned then and went over toward the door. The man didn't say a word till we were almost there, then he says, "Hold on there!"

We stopped.

"What do you know about what is fair and what isn't, or what is good business and what isn't?"

"I may not know much about b-b-business," says Mark, "but anybody knows what's f-fair. Here I am—a customer of your railroad just like a man that buys a steak from a b-butcher is a customer of the butcher. If folks wouldn't use your railroad to send stuff on you would have to go out of b-business. It looks to me like I was doing something you ought to appreciate when I ship a car of freight, and that when I come to see you about railroad b-business, that is goin' to put m-money into your p-pocket, the least you could do and be fair would be to l-listen. I'm always mighty anxious to keep my customers feelin' f-f-friendly toward me."

"H'm!" says the president.

Mark went on along toward the door and never looked back.

"Just a minute," says the president. "What's your hurry?"

"We thought you wanted us to g-go."

"Come back here," says he. "Come back here. What do you mean, anyhow, coming into my office and talking to me like this? How dare you talk to me like this?"

I tell you I was pretty scared, but I looked at Mark and his eyes were twinkling.

"I know I was right about you, sir," says he.

"Right? What do you mean?"

"That you was f-fair and square, sir."

"H'm!" says the president. "Sit down and be quick. I haven't any time to waste. Tell me what you want and tell it briefly. No beating around the bush." Anybody would have thought he was going to bite our heads off.

So Mark told him the whole thing from beginning to end, and he told it quick. I hadn't any idea so much could be told to anybody in such a short time; but then I might have known Mark could do it if he wanted to. When he got right down to business he could be mighty brief, I'll tell you.

"And that's what you've dared to break into my office to bother me with, is it? For a cent I'd have you thrown out. I don't know but I ought to do worse."

Mark he never said a word, but just looked at the president respectful and confident.

The president turned around to his desk and wrote, and then he fairly threw a paper at Mark. "There," says he. "Now git out."

Mark looked at the paper and I looked over his shoulder. It said:

To all officials and employees of the P. G. R. R.: See to it that the bearer, Mark Tidd, is provided with freight-cars at any point to be transported to any other point in the United States within twelve hours of a request. This order is superior to all other rules or embargoes that may be at this time in force.

And his name was signed.

"Thank you, sir," says Mark, "and good-by."

He never looked up, and I thought he wasn't even going to nod his head when we went out, but he called us back again. "D'you know why I gave you that order?" says he.

"I think so, sir," says Mark.

"Well, you don't," says the president, "but I'll tell you. It's because you've got the most tremendous crust in the world. It's because you weren't afraid, and it was because you had the backbone to force your way in here and compel me to talk to you. That's why. Now git."

We got.

CHAPTER XIV

"NOW," says Mark Tidd when we were on the train again, "I guess we kin go to work l-l-lookin' for George Piggins."

"Somethin' else is apt to happen," says I. "You can't never tell."

"I guess 'most everything has h-happened," says he. "There hain't much more left." Then all of a sudden he give me a poke in the ribs and says, "*Tod Nodder.*"

"Eh?" says I.

"Tod Nodder," says he.

"What about him? Tod Nodder hain't no reason for pokin' me black and blue."

"Who was he always loafin' around with?"

"Why, George Piggins!" says I.

"Never seen one without the other, did you?"

"Not that I know of."

"Well?" says he.

"Well yourself," says I, "and see how you like it."

"I mean," says he, "that if anybody in the world knows where George is. the feller is Tod Nodder."

"Maybe so, but what does that git *us?*"

"*If* he knows where George is," says Mark, "maybe we kin git s-s-somethin' out of him some way."

"It's worth t-tryin'," says I.

"Anythin's worth t-tryin'," says he, "and everythin's worth tryin' when you're in the fix we're in. For a spell we'll leave Silas Doolittle Bugg to run the mill. I guess he kin l-look after the manufacturin' end with what help we kin give, and put all our time on f-findin' George. We know Wiggamore's l-lookin' for him, and Wiggamore's got money to look with. He kin hire men to do his lookin'. All we got is us and what b-brains we got."

"Admittin' we got any," says I.

It was evening when we got home, but we got hold of Binney and Tallow and told them what had happened and how we was going to get all the freight-cars we needed; and we planned how we would meet next morning early, and two of us would keep watch on Miss Piggins's house and the other two would lay for Tod Nodder. Mark and I were going after Nodder. That left it so that if anything happened one of each couple could stay to watch while the other went for help or to do any following that was necessary. Mark said it would be a pretty good idea to keep an eye on Wiggamore or any men that he had hanging around town.

That's the way it turned out. Binney stayed to watch Miss Piggins. Tallow went mogging after a strange man with fancy clothes that let on he was a detective and was working for Wiggamore, and Mark and I went to hunt up Tod Nodder.

You could 'most always tell where to find Tod. It was the place where nobody would be like to come along and offer him a job. Tod was the kind that always complained about not having work, and then took mighty good care to hide somewheres where work couldn't find him. Lazy! Whoo! Why, he was so lazy when he fished he did it with a night line, and then he hated to pull it in to take off the fish!

We stopped at the mill a minute, and Silas Doolittle come up to us, all excited.

"Say," says he, "somebody was monkeyin' around this mill last night. I was passin' about nine o'clock and I seen a light. I come rushin' right down. It looked like the light was 'way up toward the roof. Well, I busted right in and went rampagin' up-stairs, and before I knowed I rammed right into a feller on the stairs. He was comin' down as fast as I was goin' up, and the way we come together would 'a' made a railroad accident jealous. He got the best of it, though, for he was a-comin' down-stairs. Yes, sir. He lammed right into me and clean upset me so's I rolled all the way down, and doggone it

if I didn't leave about a peck of skin on them steps. Then he trompled right over the top of me and skedaddled. I couldn't ketch him and I couldn't find no harm he'd done. But after this I calc'late I'll sleep right here into this mill. That's what I'll do, and if anybody comes fussin' around I guess they'll find out they got Silas Doolittle Bugg to reckon with."

"Mighty good idee," says Mark. "Say, we got two freight-cars comin' in this m-mornin'. Git 'em loaded so's they'll ketch the noon freight."

"Have to have help," says Silas.

"Hire some of them grocery-store loafers to help," says Mark. "Us f-fellers has got somethin' mighty important to look after."

Well, Mark and I started out then to get our eyes on Tod Nodder and to keep them on him. He wasn't so easy to find as we thought he would be. Maybe they was because there was a man in town trying to hire folks to do some work on the railroad. Tod would hide away from such a man harder than he would hide from a tribe of scalping Indians. He wasn't at any of the usual loafing-places, and at the livery-stable where he 'most generally slept they said they hadn't seen him since daylight. They said he started off somewheres about four o'clock in the morning. Now when a man like Tod Nodder

goes somewheres at four o'clock in the morning there are lots of things he *might* go to do, but there hain't but one thing he's very likely to go for, and that's fish.

After we had rummaged all around and couldn't come across him Mark says, "Well, the s-s-skeezicks must 'a' gone f-f-fishin'."

"Where?" says I.

"Tod's one of these p-pickerel fishermen," says Mark. "Seems like pickerel and him is mighty fond of each other. So," says he, "I calc'late we better make for the bayou."

The bayou was a kind of elbow of the Looking-glass River that flows into the main river just below town. When the railroad came along they built right across that elbow, shutting it off into a kind of a lake shaped like a letter U, and the banks was mostly swampy and all overgrown with underbrush. Seems like the pickerel was fond of hanging around in there, and folks who knew how to fish was always hauling regular whoppers out of there. There was places where the banks were high and where you could take a long pole and fish right from the shore. We sort of figured Tod would pick out one of those places if he was there, on account of its being less work than to row out a boat.

Mark was always thinking ahead a little, so what does he do but go past his house and stop for a lunch. He wasn't going to be caught out

in the country somewheres without anything to eat, not if he knew himself. Then we started off for the bayou, which wasn't far. We started in at the railroad on one end and just skirted the shore, keeping our eyes open every inch of the way, and, sure enough, along about half-way around we saw a bamboo fish-pole sticking out.

"Injuns," says Mark Tidd.

"Where?" says I.

"Everywhere. All around us. They're a r-r-raidin' party gittin' ready to bust out on the town and scalp everybody and carry off the wimmin and children. We got to creep up on 'em and f-f-find out their plans and warn Wicksville."

"I don't understand no Injun language," says I.

"I do," says he. "I learned 'most all the Injun languages when I was a captive among them some time back."

"Um!" says I. "I forgot about that. Come to think of it, I was one of them captives, too. I kin speak Choctaw and Hog Latin and a lot of them languages myself."

"Good!" says he. "Now cautious if you want to keep any hair g-g-growin' on your head."

We did pretty good. In ten minutes we was lying not a hundred foot from Tod Nodder, and he hadn't the least idea in the world that anybody was within a mile of him. At that dis-

tance we could whisper without any danger, so Mark leans over and says to me:

"Biggest war p-p-party I ever see," says he. "They mean b-business. Look at that war-paint."

Tod was some smeared up, but most folks would have called it dirt. I didn't care, though. If Mark Tidd wanted it to be war-paint, why, war-paint it was. We just laid there and watched and calc'lated how we could save Wicksville from all those savages who weren't there, and we told each other what doggone brave and noble things we was going to do till I got so I thought I was quite a fellow and Mark was all swelled up like a toad that's eaten too many flies.

All at once Mark grabbed my arm and says, "*Look!*"

I looked. Right past Tod Nodder, and about a hunderd feet away from him, a man's head was coming up slow over the top of a bush. We couldn't see him well enough to make out who he was, but we could see that he was watching Tod mighty interested. He watched a few minutes and then pulled down his head. Then we could see the bush move a little like he was settling down comfortable behind it. But we couldn't be sure. Maybe he was crawling off.

"Now what d'you make of that?" I says.

"I don't make n-nothin' of it. It's mysterious," says Mark.

"S'pose he's there yet, or did he sneak off?"

"Don't know, but we ought to f-f-find out. How be you on climbin', Plunk?"

"When folks wants to teach a monkey to climb," says I, "they fetch it to me."

"All right," says he.

"Then suppose you slide b-back there and shin up that big h-hemlock. Keep out of sight on the other side of the trunk. If you kin git 'way up near the top you ought to be able to see down on top of that f-feller if he's still there."

I went off quiet. I'll bet I was so quiet Mark wouldn't have known I left if he hadn't been watching me—like Uncas used to do. It wasn't much of a job to climb that tree, and pretty soon I was 'way up where I could look down on all that part of the country. At first I had to kind of search around with my eyes before I got my bearings. Then I made out Mark Tidd, and started looking for the man. Sure enough, there he was laying on his stomach and taking things as comfortable as he could. He was settled there for the day, by the way things looked, and he was watching Tod Nodder.

I stayed where I was because it was a good place to be. I felt kind of high up and splendid, looking down onto the world. It give me a sort of fine kind of a feeling that I liked.

All the time I kept looking around that patch of underbrush and little trees to see if any other parties of Indians was coming along for reinforcements. I could see plain from where I was, because I was so high up I could look right down over the tops of bushes and everything. Well, pretty soon I saw something that sort of interested me. It was quite a ways behind the man, and I couldn't make out what it was, but there was a look about it that didn't fit, somehow. You know what I mean. Whatever it was looked as if it didn't *belong* where it was. I kept watching it, and sometimes I thought it moved and sometimes I knew it didn't move. I couldn't make up my mind which.

I couldn't tell what the shape of it was, nor anything, but it looked suspicious, so I kept right on watching it—and after a long time it moved. Yes, sir, it moved plain from behind the bush that hid it and toward the man. It was some kind of a human being, and he was up to something. It took me some time to get it into my head what he was up to, and then it dawned on me. He was watching the man that was spying on Tod Nodder.

Now that was confusing as all-git-out. Here was a mysterious man spying on Tod and a heap more mysterious person sneaking around to keep his eye on the spy. I drew a long breath and looked farther back into the underbrush, be-

cause you can't tell what might happen. There might have been somebody spying on that second spy, and another watching the third, and so on. Why, there might have been a string of spies, each watching the one in front of him, that stretched 'way around the earth!

I knew Mark Tidd would be a lot interested in this thing, so after I had watched long enough to make sure those two were the only spies in sight, I shinned down again careful and crept up to Mark. I did it so stealthy that he didn't know I was coming until I reached out and touched him, and then he was that startled you wouldn't believe.

"How's that?" says I. "I'll bet there hain't an Injun could 'a' stole up any quieter."

He didn't say a thing for a minute, and then he tried to let on he hadn't been startled a bit.

"See him?" says he.

"Yes," says I, "and that hain't all. He's there watchin' Tod, and behind him is somebody else watchin' *him*."

"Eh?" says Mark. "What's that?"

"Sure as shootin'," says I. "Somebody's spyin' on the man that's spyin' on Tod."

"What d'you make of it?" says he.

"Nothin'," says I, "but it does look to me like we was landed plumb in the middle of somethin' mighty mysterious."

He sat quiet for a while, thinking and pinching

his fat cheek and jerking at his ear, but *he* couldn't make anything of it.

"It l-looks to me like the man that's watchin' Tod m-might be workin' for Wiggamore. Maybe they've had b-brains enough to think Tod might lead 'em to George Piggins. But whoever in the world would be watchin' the spy is beyond me a mile. There hain't no sense to it."

"There's somethin' to it," says I. "Nobody's layin' off there behind a bush, bein' et up by mosquitoes and havin' ants crawl down his spine, jest for fun. No, sirree; you can bet he's got a reason."

"Sure he's got a reason," says Mark, "and we got to f-find out what his reason is; but I don't see at this minute jest how we are goin' about it."

"The only thing," says I, "is to stick around here and keep our eyes on Tod, and then to follow him wherever he goes. And see if these other fellers follow him, too."

"That's right," says Mark. "We'll l-lay low and do just that. With all them spies traipsin' around the woods, it's goin' to be mighty hard to follow Tod without gettin' seen by some of 'em, but we kin do it."

"You bet we kin," says I. "Sich frontiersmen as you and me could come mighty clost to crawlin' into one of them feller's pockets without

their knowin' it. Anyhow, *I* could. If you was to git into a man's pocket, the chances is he'd sense a leetle extry weight about him somewheres."

"Huh!" says Mark. And then in a couple of minutes, "Let's eat some l-lunch."

CHAPTER XV

WE had lunch, and then we went to work waiting again, and we waited and waited and waited. It seemed like Tod Nodder was going to spend the whole day right where he was, and that is exactly what he did. I wished we could fish or something, but we didn't dare. We could hardly talk, and what talking we did had to be in whispers. Besides, we were afraid all the time that somebody would be sneaking around in the woods behind us like somebody was behind the man that was spying on Tod. If somebody was watching him, why, somebody might be watching us. We got to thinking about that until Mark got me to climb that tree again.

I shinned up it and stayed about an hour, but nobody was in sight or came in sight but Tod Nodder and the man that was watching him and the man that was watching *him*. Nobody was behind us, and, so far as I was able to discover, nobody had any notion that we were anywhere near the bayou. When I was sure of it I came down again, and we settled ourselves to watch. It was pretty tedious, I can tell you, and no

amount of pertending about Injuns or anything else seemed to make the time go faster. Fun is fun and work is work, but laying around just *waiting* is a nuisance and nothing else. I'd rather split wood than wait. I'd rather study grammar than wait, and when I say that I've said about all I can say.

Mark Tidd went and sneaked a nap while I wasn't looking. He can always manage to take a nap. I couldn't have slept if I was paid for it, and I made up my mind he shouldn't sleep, either, so I took to catching big black ants and setting them on his neck so they would crawl down under his clothes. I didn't get much fun out of it, but it was some comfort to know he wasn't getting any, so I kept it up. I was hot and sweaty and itched all over, and I guess as many ants crawled on me of their own accord as I managed to sic onto Mark. I wished Tod Nodder was swallowed by a whale or something, and I made up my mind that the next time Mark Tidd had any watching to do he could count me out. My stummick was full of watching.

It got five o'clock and six o'clock, and still Tod didn't budge. It began to look like he had taken root and was going to grow there. It turned out later that he was asleep with his back against a tree and had been asleep all the afternoon. He hadn't stayed because he wanted to, but because he went fast asleep and didn't wake

up. A man like that ought to carry an alarm-clock around with him. If it didn't do him any good, it would be a lot of help to boys like Mark and me that had to sit and watch him.

It was after seven o'clock when Tod finally stretched and gaped and twisted around and pulled in his fish-line and started for somewheres. Now it's easy to follow one man, but to follow a man when he is followed by some one else and his follower is followed by a third man, is another kind of a thing altogether. We had a tough job cut out for us to find out where Tod was going without having one of those other fellows finding out that we *were* following him. But the only thing to do was to do our best.

We waited for Tod to leave, and then we waited for the first man to sneak after him, and then we waited for the second fellow to sneak after him, and then along we traipsed at the tail of the procession. It was a regular parade.

We hadn't had a good look at the last fellow, because he had been quite a ways off, hiding behind bushes, and we didn't get a good look at him now because it was getting dusk and we had to wait till he got quite a distance off before we mogged after him. We kind of skirted around town. After we had gone along about a mile we saw the fellow ahead scrooch down all of a sudden, and we scrooched, too. We figured out it meant that Tod had stopped somewheres

ahead and everybody was settling down to wait for him to move on again.

We crept up a little closer to try to get a peek at the one ahead, but it was getting real dark by now and all we could see was just a black blob where he crouched. Then he started up again and we took after him, but right there we got a good scare, for, all unexpected, there popped up a third fellow and he acted like he was following the second. Anyhow, he was following somebody and joined right in the parade ahead of us. That made quite a string, with Tod leading off and a man on his heels and another on *his* heels and this third one that came from nowheres all of a sudden, and Mark and me bringing up the tail.

On we went past the edge of town and headed for the river. We took along the bank toward town again, and anybody could see that Tod had been sneaking roundabout to get some place without being seen.

"Wonder where they're headin'?" says I.

"I got a n-notion," says Mark.

"Where?"

"Wait and see. Maybe I hain't right."

"Where d'you s'pose Tallow and Binney are?"

He grinned like he had some kind of a secret, and says he guessed we'd be likely to see them pretty soon.

"Say," says I, "what you got on your mind,

anyhow? What you found out and how did you find it? I hain't seen anythin'."

"I hain't s-s-seen anythin', but I been figgerin' and calc'latin', and I b'lieve I know where we're headin' and why we're headin' there, and who the man is that was watchin' Tod Nodder, and who was watchin' him, and all that. I hain't sure, but I'm pretty close to sure."

"Huh!" says I. "Little bird told you, I s'pose."

"No," says Mark, "it come to me in a d-d-dream."

"Well," says I, "who is it, and why?"

"Wait and see," says he.

We went on a little farther, and then Mark says, "He's got to be d-disposed of somehow."

"Who?" says I.

"The feller that's f-followin' Tod Nodder."

"Why him and not the rest?"

"I got an idee they'll come nigh to disposin' of themselves," says he.

And that was all I could get out of him. You never in your life saw such a close-mouthed boy as Mark Tidd. Why, there were things he wouldn't tell even to himself, and as for letting loose of a fact to anybody else before he got good and ready to tell it—you might as well sit around waiting for a boulder to roll up a hill. I knew him, so I didn't waste any breath asking more questions. No, sir, I just mogged

along and said nothing and made the best of it.

In a couple of minutes I was surprised some. "Why," says I, "they're turnin' right down to our mill!"

"So they be," says Mark, in that way he has when he is pretty well satisfied with himself, a sort of cat-purr. "So they be." Then after a minute he says, "Come on," and grabbed me by the arm. We cut over the bank and slid down into the log-yard, and then ducked around the logs until we came to the back door of the mill. Here Mark grabbed hold of me again and we crouched down in a black shadow and waited. In about a second Tod Nodder came along, and he was carrying something. I couldn't see what it was, but it looked kind of like a basket. In went Tod, for the door wasn't locked, and then along came the man that had been following Tod, and in *he* went.

"Plunk," says Mark, "scoot over to the dam and see if a boat hain't t-t-tied jest above it."

I hustled over, and, sure enough, there was an old scow tied to a stake. I ran back quiet and told Mark. "Have them others come along?" says I.

"No," says he, "but I calc'late they're hidin' hereabouts."

I was just going to ask some more questions when I heard a holler inside the mill, and then a

racket like half a dozen men running, and out of the door came a man, and then another man, and right on his heels another. That was three. And then, you can believe it or not, out came a fourth. That was two more than went in, and I was getting mighty puzzled. I was getting something besides puzzled, too, I can tell you, and that something was *scairt.* There was too many folks mixed up in this thing to make it comfortable.

Well, sir, it wasn't enough to have all these men boil out of the mill, but what should Mark Tidd do but reach out his foot and trip the last man so that he went heels over appetite and rolled over about seven times. In a second Mark jumped up and sat on him solid and sudden, and when Mark Tidd sits on a man sudden that man is feeling something particular uncomfortable. I'll bet he thought the whole bunch of his ribs was plumb caved in.

"Binney, Tallow!" Mark yelled as loud as he could. "Run for the dam. Stop that boat from gettin' away."

Binney and Tallow! I was considerable flabbergasted, but to have Binney and Tallow join in with the rest of the circus was more than I could stand. Mark seemed to know they were there, but how he knew it I couldn't see. The whole business was too much for me.

I didn't know just what to do, so I rushed

over and helped Mark sit on his man, though goodness knows that wasn't necessary. Mark was doing all the sitting anybody needed.

The man under Mark wriggled and twisted and made some noises with his voice like he wasn't enjoying himself to speak of. He sounded like he wanted to be let up, and in a jiffy Mark rolled off of him and let him up. But he didn't move off. No, he just sat up and grunted and began to feel of himself and let out sounds of misery.

"Hurt?" says Mark.

"Busted all to pieces," says the man.

"That's what you git for t-t-trespassin'," says Mark. "This hain't a healthy mill for folks workin' for Mr. Wiggamore to go f-f-foolin' around."

The man didn't say a word, and then out of the darkness came two men, one hanging onto the other by the collar, and Mark says: "Hello. Silas Doolittle! Who you got there?"

"Dunno. Somebody monkeyin' around the mill," says Silas.

Mark got up and took a look. "Tod Nodder," says he. "T'other f-f-feller git away?"

"Jumped into a boat," says Silas.

"Then Binney and Tallow didn't stop him, eh?"

"Was that Binney and Tallow? Somebody was chasin' him hard, but I didn't see who.

Looked like the place was full of folks runnin' and bein' chased. Seems like somethin' happened."

"Seems so," says Mark.

"What 'll I do with this?" says Silas, giving Tod a little shake.

"Oh," says Mark, "l-let him go! He's been mighty useful. We hain't got a thing against Tod."

Silas acted like he didn't like to do it, but he let go of Tod, and Tod scooted.

"Guess maybe you better f-f-follow him," says Mark to the man on the ground. "Tell Mr. Wiggamore you had bad l-luck. Tell him that you wasn't able to do what you set out for on account of bein' interrupted. And if I was you, I'd go away somewheres and hide."

"Huh!" says the man. "You dunno what you're talkin' about."

"Maybe so," says Mark. "Good night, mister."

And *he* went off—the man, I mean.

That left just Mark and Silas and me, but in another minute along came Tallow and Binney.

"Hey, Mark Tidd!" says Tallow.

"Right here by the door," says Mark.

"What's been happenin'?"

"Has been a l-little confusin'," says Mark. "But it all come out right except l-lettin' that boat git away, and maybe that was for the b-best. George Piggins was in it."

"What's that?" says I.

"It was George," says Mark.

"How d'you know?" says I.

"Easy," says he. "Jest think t-t-things over. You and me was watchin' Tod Nodder. A man was watchin' him, t-too. That was Wiggamore's detective. He figgered like we did, that Tod Nodder might lead him to George—which is jest what happened."

"But those other fellers," says I.

"Why, Tallow and Binney, of course! We left one to watch the detective and the other to watch Miss Piggins. When Tod stopped at Miss Piggins's Binney took after him. Of course Tallow was right after the detective all the while. So we got into one p-parade. I was all p-puzzled at first, but it come to me all in a minute. That's how I knew Tallow and Binney were here and yelled at them to head off George."

"Um!" says I.

"But we didn't head him off," says Binney.

"May be j-jest as well," says Mark. "We'll f-find him to-morrow or n-next day. I got a notion I know where he is right now, or where he will be when he lands out of his boat."

"Where?" says I.

"Big Hole Island," says he.

"Maybe so. But what was he doin' here?"

"Come d-down after grub. Been doin' it

every night. It was him we almost caught in the mill when we saw the light."

It was clear enough now, but such a mixed-up business as it was a few minutes before I never heard of. I never would have got it figured out, but Mark was good at that kind of thing, which was lucky.

"Better go home now," says he, "and get a night's s-s-sleep. We'll start up the river for George Piggins to-morrow."

"Better stay in town," says Silas Doolittle. "There's trouble at the mill. All our men but two has quit work."

"What for?" says Mark.

"Claim they been offered better jobs," says Silas.

"Huh! . . . That means Wiggamore has hired 'em away. Hum! . . . Well, we can't stop to fix that. See if you kin get more m-men, Silas. Do the best you kin. If you can't get anybody, just plug along for a day or two. We got to find George Piggins before we do anything else."

We said good night to Silas and left him feeling kind of blue, I guess. I was kind of blue myself, because it did look to me like we ought to stay and see about the mill instead of traipsing around after George. But there's no use trying to run against Mark Tidd when he has his mind made up. He was going after George, and he

would keep on till he found him if it took a year. It was a kind of a disease with him, like a boil, I guess. When you got a boil you hain't comfortable till it busts. Well, Mark Tidd was never comfortable till he did what he set out to do.

When I went to bed I wasn't expecting anything exciting to happen the next day. I wasn't much expecting anything to happen, which shows that you never can tell. How was I to guess that the next little while was going to be about the most exciting and worrying time we ever had? But it was.

CHAPTER XVI

"WHAT makes you think George Piggins is on Big Hole Island?" says I to Mark when we met early the next morning. I didn't see why he should hit on that place for George to hide. The world looked like a pretty good-sized place to me, and I couldn't see any reason for picking a couple of acres of marshy ground out of it. But he had some reason and I wanted to know what it was.

"Well," says he, "you know George."

"I do," says I.

"What's the m-m-main thing about George? If you was g-goin' to p-pick out somethin' that George was famous for, what would it be?"

"Laziness," says I.

"Well?" says he, as if that settled it right there.

"Well what?" says I.

He sort of scowled impatient, as if it made him have a pain somewheres to have to talk to a person that was as dumb-headed as I was, and says, "How far would a lazy man row a b-b-boat?"

"Not farther than he could help," says I.

"Right the first time," says he. "Now what's the nearest place a man could hide—that he has to git to in a boat?"

"Why," says I, "I guess Big Hole Island."

"Sure," says he, "and we know he's on an island, because if he wasn't he wouldn't use a boat. He'd ride a horse or walk. Both is easier 'n rowin' a scow. So he's on an island, and the nearest island is Big Hole, which p-proves that's where he is."

"Have it your own way," says I, "and let's git started."

Now my way of getting to Big Hole Island would have been to take a boat and row there as fast as I could, but not Mark. He always had to do things the hardest way, and he had to be secret about it and drag in a lot of pertending and that sort of stuff. He wouldn't just walk up to George Piggins and tell him all about it, but he'd have to make up a lot of things so that by the time we got there we would all be tired out and ready to quit. Besides, he said George would run if he saw us coming, and that we'd have to sneak up on him. Just where he would run to on Big Hole Island I didn't see. He couldn't run more than a couple of hunderd feet in any direction, and if he went to running circles around the shore I figgered we boys could soon tire him out at that; but Mark wouldn't have it so.

His idea was for us to walk up to the shore across from Big Hole and then to swim to the island. We was to be a party of scouts and George Piggins was an Injun chief that was off alone making medicine and getting ready to turn his braves loose on the whites in the biggest Injun war that ever was. Mark's notion was that if we caught the chief and carried him off it would spoil the whole war, and then maybe the Injuns wouldn't ever uprise any more, but would become tame and gentle forever after. The notion of George Piggins as an Injun chief made me snicker. Why, any sort of a decent Injun would be ashamed to slam a tomahawk into George for fear of soiling it; and as for wearing George's scalp, I'll bet you couldn't find even a squaw that would do it for money.

"I'm g-g-goin' to make this Injun sign a treaty never to butcher any more whites," says Mark, "and I went to a lawyer to get it done right." At that he pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and showed it to me. On top it said "Option" in big letters, and then there was a lot of legal words and a place to have George sign his name and for witnesses to sign their names.

"'Tain't no treaty," says I. "That's just business, like the time we bought the store in Sunfield."

"Huh!" says he. "I guess we kin pertend it was a treaty, can't we?"

"We kin pertend it's a bunch of bananas or a ham or a two-headed hoo-hoo bird," says I, "but that don't make it so."

"It does while we're pertendin' it," says he, as stubborn as a mule. "Anythin' s-s-so while you're p-pertendin' it."

That was the way with him. Yes, sir, whatever he pertended he believed was so while he was at it. And he acted as if it was so and talked as if it was so. Which hain't all. He managed somehow to make the rest of us feel just like he did. There was times when we had some mighty fine adventures that way—that was real adventures till we woke up and found out we'd just been pertendin'.

Anyhow, we started up the river toward the island, and made pretty good time in spite of having to hide every now and then because hostile bands was monkeying around. At last we got into the woods just across from Big Hole and scrooched down to see if we could catch a sight of George. We couldn't. Not even a sign of smoke like he had been cooking his breakfast. But that wasn't so surprising, for the island was all over trees and bushes and vines, and a lot of it was swampy. There was a time once when folks used to have picnics there, and then there was a little floating bridge across that used to get about ankle-deep with water when a crowd walked over it; but that was a

long time ago, and now there wasn't much left except a tumble-down dance-floor with a roof and no sides, with a refreshment counter across one end. Mark judged George would most likely be living somewheres in that old dance-hall.

"S-swim over one at a t-time," says Mark. "Each f-feller pull up a bush and hold it in his teeth and come down with the current. Then the chief 'll think it's jest a bush adrift and won't suspect it's a party comin' to capture him."

"Who first?" says I.

"Me," says Mark.

"I'm the best swimmer," says Tallow, which he was by long odds.

"Don't make no d-difference. It's my p-place to go first," says Mark, and that settled it. It was just as if he was going into real danger, and he almost believed he was. That was the way he would have acted, anyhow. You never saw him dodge or try to get out of doing his share and more than his share whenever a pinch came.

So we all took off our clothes and did them up in bundles, and we got us each a bush, and Mark started off. It was only about a hunderd-foot swim, but there was quite some current. Now maybe Mark Tidd looked like a bush floating down-stream to an Injun on the island, but to me on the shore he looked more like a hippopotamus carrying home his dinner. Anyhow,

he got across, and then came Tallow, and then me, and Binney last. We all got there safe and sound and pulled on our clothes and held a council of war.

Mark laid out a lot of plans about how we would surround the Injun chief and pounce on him before he could get his hand onto his tomahawk, and how we would tie him to a tree and all that. But I says:

"Hain't it a good idee to find out if he's here before we catch him? 'Cause if we pounce when there hain't nobody to pounce onto we kind of waste work."

"He's got to be here," says Mark. "Everythin' p-p-points that way. It wouldn't be reasonable for him to be any place else."

"It's all right to reason somethin' out," says I, "and maybe you can do it and feel sure in your mind it's so; but for me, jest give me one peek at George Piggins and I'll believe he's here."

"Listen," says Mark. "I kin p-p-prove it easy. Jest start out and skirmish around the island till you f-f-find his boat. It 'll be close to the shore, because he's too lazy to pull it up far. When you find the boat you'll know he's here, won't you?"

"I'll feel reasonably certain," says I.

"Then scoot," says he.

I took off as fast as I could go—that is, as fast

as I could crawl on my stummick, for Mark said I had to go that way. Well, I hadn't gone far, sort of poking my head in front of me regardless, when all of a sudden it brought up against a plank with a bump that made me see a Fourth of July celebration, and when I got so I could see what was going on, why, it was George's boat! Sure enough Mark had reasoned it out right. I might have known he would.

So I raised myself up to turn around to report. I just happened to look across the river to the mainland, and there I saw something moving. I watched, and in a second a man came into sight. He was a stranger. Right then I didn't think much about it, because I didn't know him, but I did notice he had on some kind of a fancy vest with a lot of color into it. He came out and looked across at the island, and I says to myself it was a city man looking for a place to fish. Then I crawled back to Mark and the fellows.

"He's here," says I.

"Huh!" says Mark.

"Of course you knew it," says I, "but don't say so."

"Anyhow," says he, "let's go ahead with c-catchin' him."

"Shoot," says I.

"I wish," says he, "that we had a witness."

"What kind of a witness?"

"A man over twenty-one, to s-s-sign that paper after George does," says he.

"I know where we kin git one," says I.

"Where?" says he.

"Right across the river," says I. "There's a feller lookin' for a place to fish. City feller. Kind of big, with a gaudy vest on him."

"What's that?" says Tallow, sharp-like.

"With a gaudy vest on him," says I. "Why?"

"All red and blue and orange and sich?"

"Looked that way," says I; "anyhow, it was mighty dazzlin'."

"Where was he?"

I pointed. "Right over there."

"Mark," says Tallow, "that was the feller I was followin' yesterday. The man Wiggamore's got lookin' for George."

"The f-f-feller I sat on last night?"

"Uh-huh."

"Might 'a' known somethin' disagreeable would h-happen," says Mark. "I never yet see anythin' come off plain and easy. Now I calc'late we're in for a fracas with Wiggamore and his gang."

"Aw, let's catch George," says I, "and worry later."

"The feller that d-d-does his worryin' ahead of time is the f-f-feller that comes out on top. You got to f-figger what the other feller's goin' to do, and then do somethin' first that 'll upset

his plans. That's the only way. Now I calc'late that man's reasoned out like we did that George is here somewheres. Maybe he hain't sure he's on this island, but he will be. Then he'll come rammin' over and we'll have him on our hands. If he gits to George before we git George all signed up, no tellin' what 'll h-happen. Maybe he'll have so much m-money he'll jest wind George around his f-finger. See? So we got to head him off. We'll have to p-plan." He sat back and squinted some for a minute, and then he says: "Binney and Tallow stay here and keep w-w-watch. The first sign of him comin' across, you whistle our whistle. You know. Keep out of sight. . . . I do wish I had a witness."

"You hain't," says I.

"I know it," says he. "Come on."

Well, we crawled in toward the middle of the island where the old dance-hall was, and got perty generally messy with the soft black muck that was everywheres, but we did it scientific, anyhow, like regular Injun scouts. We come so cautious we didn't hardly realize we was getting anywheres ourselves, and that's being perty cautious, I can tell you. At last we came to the old clearing and peeked out, and there sat George Piggins on a rickety step, a-smoking and a-whittling, about half asleep and the other half dozing. He looked happy, like a man that

has got a job that just suits him. George had that kind of a job. The only anxiety he had at that minute was to keep himself from doing anything to make him tired.

There wasn't any place for him to run, and, besides, it would have taken him a couple of minutes to get up the energy to move, so Mark says, "Git him," and we up and run at him for all that was in us. George didn't notice us for a minute, and then he got up kind of dazed and put in a couple of seconds looking startled and scairt, and then there we were, standing one on each side of him.

"Howdy, George?" says Mark.

"Why," says he, "I hain't sure. Honest Injun, I hain't sure exactly how I be, but seems like I was feelin' middlin' well a minute back. . . . Say, 'tain't right to come rushin' up on a feller and scare him so he jumps fit to crack his neck. Hain't you got no consideration for folks's feelin's? Eh? And me a-settin' so peaceable and not even thinkin'."

"Didn't mean to s-s-scare you, George," says Mark. "But we wanted to see you p'tic'-lar."

"What on account of?" says George, nervous-like.

"On account of two things—a chunk of land and a hog."

"Doggone that hawg!" says George. "I 'most wisht I hadn't never heard of no hawg."

"George," says Mark, "hain't you 'm-most tired of l-livin' out here?"

"Better 'n where the sheriff 'u'd have me livin'," says he. " 'Tain't so much jail," he says, "but they might set me to some job that would bust me down. I hain't robust. There hain't many jobs of work I've got health to undertake."

"You and your sister owns a p-piece of land across the river from t-t-town," says Mark.

"Calc'late so. Why?"

"We want to buy it."

"Huh! How much?"

"How much you want?"

"What's my sister say?"

"She l-leaves it to you."

"Um! . . . That there's a mighty fine piece of land."

"For hogs to root on," says Mark.

"We're mighty fond of that land. It's been in the family a long time."

"N-never earned nothin' for you?"

"Some."

"What you askin'?"

"I druther you made an offer."

"Three hunderd d-d-dollars," says Mark.

"Shucks!" says George.

"More 'n it's worth by half," says Mark.

"Gimme five hunderd and it's yourn," says George.

"Give you f-f-four hunderd and fix it up for you about that hog so's you kin come back and live to home."

"Kin you?"

"To be sure."

"Gimme the money."

"Whoa!" says Mark. "We've got to have deeds and things b-before you git all the money. But we f-f-fetched along an option. All you got to do is sign that, and we give you t-t-twenty-five dollars down. If we don't g-give you the rest in thirty days you kin keep the twenty-five."

"I dunno," says George.

"It's b-business," says Mark. He pulled out his paper and a fountain-pen and stuck them under George's nose, with twenty-five dollars in bills, and says, "Sign r-right there."

"I dunno," says George again, but his eyes was on the twenty-five perty sharp, and 'fore he knew it he was reaching for the pen and in another minute his name was all hitched to the paper. Mark handed over the money.

"Now to git a w-witness," says Mark.

"Witness? What for a witness?"

"Jest to write his name alongside of yourn. It's legal."

"I hain't havin' much to do with legal things lately," says George.

"No harm in this," says Mark. "We guarantee there hain't."

"I hain't got no witness," says George; and that very minute came our whistle from the place where Binney and Tallow were hiding.

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN that whistle sounded I wasn't startled particular and I wasn't much surprised. I just says to myself, "Here she comes," meaning trouble. I looked at Mark, and maybe you won't believe me, but he actually looked tickled. Like you would be if you got good news.

"Well?" says I.

"See what it is," says he.

"I know," says I; "it's the feller with the vest. Come on."

George Piggins looked some put out, and sort of startled-like and flabbergasted. Things was happening too rapid to make George happy. He wasn't what you'd call *quick* at any time, and right now he was about seven minutes behind events without any chance of ever catching up. The last I see of him for a spell consisted mainly of open mouth, for Mark and I made a jump toward the shore.

When we got there Mr. Man was half-way across in some kind of a boat he had picked up.

"We kin hold him off," says I; "there hain't but one of him."

"Maybe," says Mark. "Scoot back and git that l-l-long pole layin' near George."

I done so and got there when Mr. Man was about fifty feet off, and then we all stood up and looked at him and waited. He had his back toward us and didn't see us till he turned around to take his bearings, and then he turned 'way around and squinted and says, "Good mornin'."

"Good mornin'," says Mark.

"Campin'?" says the man.

"Not exactly," says Mark.

"Anybody on the island?"

"We b-b-be," says Mark.

"See a man sneakin' around?"

"One in a rowboat," says Mark, "with a f-f-fancy vest on."

"Meanin' me?"

"Calc'late so."

"Say, young feller, you're about the size and weight of somebody that sat on my stummick last night. By any chance was you him?"

"I was," says Mark.

"You'll excuse me for not recognizin' your face," says the man, cheerful-like, "but we was in the dark."

"We hain't in the dark now," says Mark, like he meant more than he said.

"Meanin', I s'pose, that you've found that

Piggins feller? I hain't clear what you want with him, nor why you're mixin' into private business, though I was warned to look out for a fat kid that stuttered."

"Um!" says Mark.

"I'm comin' ashore," says the man.

"I hain't sure you be," says Mark.

"Jest watch," says the man, and he began to row again.

I waited till he got close enough to reach with the pole and then I give him a good shove that made his rickety boat rock like the mischief. He turned sort of green and let out a bellow like a calf that seen some kind of a beef ghost.

"Hey! quit that! Want to drownd a feller?" he yelled.

"F-f-figgered on givin' you a little swim," says Mark.

"Gosh! boy, I can't swim a stroke! Go easy there!"

"Um!" says Mark. "Can't swim, eh? I want to know. Sure you can't swim?"

"Give you my word. Honest Injun. Cross my heart."

"Um!" Mark sat down on the mud bank and thought a second. "Let him l-l-land," says he to me, which I done, not willing, but because a fellow has to obey orders even if he don't agree with them.

Mr. Man got out on shore, and quick as a

wink Mark jumped up and give his boat a shove out into the current. It went swinging off out of reach, and the man looked after it like somebody had just up and stole his best friend. He was mad, too.

"Say, what you mean, anyhow? How be I goin' to git offn this island?"

"Why," says Mark, grinning friendly and cordial, "you kin w-w-wait till winter and walk off on the ice."

"Hain't there another boat?"

"There is," says Mark, winking at me, "but there won't be long."

I got what he meant in a jiffy and off I scooted. It wasn't five seconds before George's boat was floating off down-stream and everybody on that island that couldn't swim was marooned.

"Now," says Mark, "let's be c-c-comfortable."

"Comfortable!" says the man. "What I want to know is what you mean by this, anyhow? What you mean by shovin' my boat off? What for do you want to shut me up on this island?"

"Well," says Mark, "we g-g-got important b-business goin' on, and it looked like you might muss it up. You can't muss up much so long as you're right here, and right here you're goin' to stay, if we can m-make you, till our business is done."

"Then Piggins is here?" says the man.

"Maybe so and maybe not. That's s-somethin' you'll have to find out for yourself."

"I got it in mind to make all of you kids find out what it feels like to get a blamed good thrashin'," says the man, getting madder than ever.

"'Twouldn't f-fetch your boat back," says Mark.

"How long you calc'late on keepin' me?"

"Hain't got no idee—plenty long, though."

"How do we eat?" says the man.

Mark looked at him and then at me, and then he winked. "You'll have to l-look out for your own eatin'," says he. "We don't undertake to pervide food. . . . Now, fellers, this gentleman most l-likely wants to set down and f-figger. Let's walk away and leave him be and not disturb him. Maybe he'll want to move around himself and look for George Piggins."

The man sat down and looked kind of miserable. We walked off.

"We got to keep him and George apart," says Mark, "till I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" says I.

"Oh," says he, "I got a sort of a kind of a s-scheme."

He said it with that kind of a way he has that means he ain't going to tell and there's no use to ask him. All of us knew him well enough not to waste breath on questions. So we went

along till we came to George Piggins, still gaping at the money Mark gave him and staring every little while at the shore as if he had something on his mind and didn't know just exactly what.

"Man just l-landed," says Mark.

"Who?" says George.

"Detective feller," says Mark.

"Eh?" says George. "What's that? What you tryin' to tell a feller? What's a detective a-doin' on this island, I want to know? Eh? Say."

"He let on he was interested in hogs," says Mark.

"Sufferin' boozle-jams!" says George. "S'pose he's a-lookin' for me? Eh? Got any idea I'm the feller he's detectivin' around after?"

"He asked if we'd seen you," says Mark.

"What you tell him? You didn't go and give me away, did you? You didn't tell on pore old George Piggins?"

"I should s-s-say not. Why, hain't we here to pertect you from the consequences of that hog? Hain't we agreed you should go free and clear of that, and be allowed to come back home jest l-l-like there wa'n't never no hog at all? Sure we have. And we're a-goin' to. And now we're warnin' you about that f-feller, and advisin' you to keep out of his way."

"Thankee," says George. "I'll remember it

of you, I will. I hain't calc'latin' to fergit sich friends as you be, and I'm a-goin' to hide me. I know a place and that there detective kin look for me till he turns pink all the way from his chin to his ears before he finds me."

"Kin you s-swim?" says Mark.

"Swim? Naw. What I want with swimmin'? Ketch me workin' like that! What? You hain't got no idee how swimmin' tires a feller! No, sir, I hain't never learned to swim, and I don't figger I ever will."

Mark sort of scowled. "B-better hide quick, then," says he, and off scooted George. Then Mark says to us: "Too much l-laziness is a dum' nuisance. I f-figgered we'd git George and swim ashore and leave that man to set and watch us. It would have f-fixed everything all right. We could have taken George right to his sister's and got her to sign that option, and found some witnesses, and then we wouldn't have had any worry, but now here we be, shut up on an island with George and the detective, and jest at this minnit I don't see how we're ever goin' to git off it with what we want. But we will," says he, and he snapped shut his jaws. "I hain't a bit d-discouraged. Jest watch and see. I'm a-goin' off to think it out."

"If we jest had that witness," says I, "we could swim off and leave both of 'em."

"Um! . . ." says Mark. "Um! . . ." Then

he turned perty sudden and walked over to a board and sat down.

"Wish I knew how the mill was gettin' along," says I to Tallow. "Maybe it's busted by this time."

"Bet it hain't," says he.

"Anyhow, I wisht we had this thing over and was back to work. I kind of liked workin' around that mill."

"Huh!" says he. "Only ones of us four I ever see workin' was Binney and me."

"Oh, that!" says I. "Anybody can do what you was doin', but it takes brains to work the way Mark and me did."

"If it does," says he, "then neither of you done anything."

"Let's walk around," says I.

We started off around the edge of the island, and I noticed we didn't see anything of Mr. Man. He wasn't in sight any place, and it kind of worried me. Then I happened to look across the river, and down-stream, maybe a hundred yards, was our boat stranded on a bar. I made up my mind I'd remember that and tell Mark. It might come in handy. We fussed around maybe an hour and went back, but Mark was still pulling at his cheeks and thinking. Just as we got there he started in to whittle, and says I to myself something or other's going to happen now perty quick.

"Seen Mr. Man?" says I to Mark.

"No," says he.

"He's disappeared," says I.

"F-f-find him, then," says Mark, sharp-like, and off he went to figgering and whittling again.

So we started off to hunt for Mr. Man, and pretty quick we heard him moving around among the bushes in the middle of the island. We went over cautious where we could see him, and in a minute you could tell he was searching. He was looking behind every log and under every hanging bush and up into every tree.

"Huntin' for George," says I. "Figgers on beatin' us even if he is stranded on a desert island."

"What if he finds him?" says Binney.

"Hain't no idea," says I.

We followed along, keeping out of sight. Mr. Man was working nearer to the old clearing, when all of a sudden he let out a yell, and we could hear something busting, and in the shake of a lamb's tail he popped out of sight. And right there I heard one of the loudest bellers I ever heard in my life.

There wasn't any use to hide any more, so all of us rushed out to see what had happened. It didn't take long to find out. Mr. Man had gone along looking for George so busy he forgot to look out for himself, which hain't a good plan, by any means, and he went and stepped onto

some rotten boards that covered an old shallow well that had once been used when the dance-hall was doing business. Yes, sir, he stepped right on those boards and they busted under him, and down he went. When we got there he was standing about up to his waist in muddy water, and his head was just so far below the edge of the ground that he couldn't reach up to it to climb out. He was in a nice mess, and he acted like he didn't enjoy it. If ever a man was in a hole that man was in one, and there wasn't the least chance in the world of his getting out of it unless somebody helped him. And the way he bellered! You would have thought he was being scalped. It wasn't comfortable, of course, but he wasn't in any danger as I could see. The trouble was he couldn't get out and he was scared.

"Go tell Mark," says I to Binney.

Binney ran off, and I leaned over and says to Mr. Man:

"Hello down there, mister."

"Oh! Wow! Get me out of here! I'm drowndin'! I bet there's snakes in here! Git me out quick! Please help me out!"

"Wait a minute," says I.

But he wasn't willing. He kept up yelling and howling until Mark got there. Mark leaned over and looked at him, and says, with a chuckle:

"Looks like you got into t-t-trouble somehow."

"Stop gabblin'," says the man, "and git me out."

"Workin' for Amassa P. Wiggamore, hain't you?" says Mark.

"Yes. What's that got to do with it? You hain't goin' to see a man drownd, be you?"

"Has he sunk m-much since you first saw him?" says Mark to me. "You know there's quicksand on this island."

Mark winked hard. I knew there was quicksand on the island, but it was 'way at the other end and not anywheres near that well.

"Looks some lower 'n he did awhile back," says I.

"Um! . . ." says Mark. "Now look here, mister. Us boys started out to run a square, h-honest business. We're operatin' a novelty-mill. Your boss is t-tryin' to bust our mill because he wants our dam and won't p-pay for it. You're helpin' him. That's why you're after George Piggins. Now we didn't put you in that well, and you can't do us no harm while you're down there. I guess the b-best plan for us is to l-leave you there."

Mr. Man began to blubber and bleat and roar, but Mark didn't pay a bit of attention.

"Let's go to town," says he. "I don't f-f-figger there's much danger of his sinkin' out of sight. Come on, fellers."

We pertended to start off, but before we had

got more than an inch he hollered so loud we was afraid he would bust something, and Mark says:

"Couldn't f-figger on makin' a deal with us?"

"No," says he. "You get me out of here. I'll settle with you when I git out."

"Now," says Mark, "that hain't no argument to offer. 'Tain't l-likely we'd help you out for the s-sake of gittin' a lickin'. We just want a little thing of you. You're safe and can't do no harm, so we kin tell you what it is. We found George Piggins, and we got an option from him to that land Wiggamore's got to have. If you'll sign it as a witness, we'll let you out."

"No," says he, and he got stubborn and kept quiet. We just sat down and waited and had a good time.

It began to get toward noon. Mark dragged out his lunch and motioned us to come closer to the well. We did and started to eat, talking loud about how good the things were. There were sandwiches and cake and bananas and pickles and pie and a lot of stuff. Mark leaned over and hoped the man wasn't hungry. He said something real hot back. Then, after a minute, he started in to argue and get real sorry for himself. Then he mentioned how hungry he was, and how uncomfortable, and then he began to beg, and all the time we was spilling crumbs on his head and talking about

our grub. I guess it was more than he could stand.

"Gimme a sandwich," says he. "I'm 'most starved. Jest one sandwich."

"We got lots," says Mark, "but maybe we'll have to stay here quite a s-s-spell. If you was to see reason and sign your name alongside of George's, we m-might do somethin' for you."

But he wouldn't. Not then. We talked some more about food and quicksand and snakes, and dropped crumbs on his head, and all to once he sort of caved in.

"Gimme a sandwich," says he, "and I'll sign anything."

"Honest?" says Mark.

"Honest," says he.

"Maybe," says Mark, "but we'd rather you s-s-signed first. First sign, then eat, then we'll help you out."

"Anything," says he. "Send along your paper. Anything to get out of this hole."

"Wiggamore won't like it," says Mark.

"Don't I know it? Well, I hain't goin' to tell him. I'm a-goin' to light out of this town quick. Wiggamore won't never see me again. I've got enough. I'm through with this business. There hain't no good luck in it."

"You'll sign sure?"

"Sure."

"Get George," says Mark.

I scooted off and began hollering for George, and pretty soon he hollered back, and when he was sure it was me he came out, and I told him what had happened.

"Mark wants you," says I.

"Is it safe?"

I told him it was, and he came along. When we got back Mark took his pen, and a note-book to write on, and the option, and talked to the man a minute, and passed them down.

"Is that your signature, George?" says Mark.

"Yes."

"You want this man to witness it?"

"Yes," says George, and down in the well Mr. Man signed his name the best he could.

"Tallow," says Mark, "swim over and git that b-b-boat Plunk saw stranded. We kin m-manage to git him out of the hole!"

Tallow went crashing off, and we let down the bough of a tree and pulled the man out. He was a sight. Honest, he was the muddiest, bedraggledest thing you ever saw, and he was tame. I never saw a grown man quite as tame as he was. He hadn't any fight left in him, and all he wanted to do was to rest and get dry. We built him a fire to dry by, and by that time Tallow came back. Mark motioned to us and we sneaked off as unsuspicious as we could, taking George along. We all five went quick to the boat and got in and rowed off.

"What's the idee?" says I to Mark. "What we maroonin' him for?"

"I won't f-feel safe till George's sister has signed this p-paper, too," says he, "and if he got ashore he might change his mind and spoil things somehow."

"Going to leave him there forever?" says I.

"We kin git him to-night," says he.

So we rowed ashore and went into town. George was a little afraid, especially when we saw the sheriff on the street, but the sheriff just nodded to George and said, "Howdy?" so *that* was all right.

We headed straight for Miss Piggins's, and, what with her deafness and her ambition to give George a licking with a broom for all the trouble he'd made her, we had quite a time to get her to sign the option; but she did. Then we started for the mill.

None of us was very easy in our minds, and we wanted to know what had happened since we left. When we got there there wasn't a sign of life. The mill was as shut down as if there never was and never would be any work done in it.

"Now what?" says I.

"Goodness knows!" says Mark. "But we'll find out q-q-quick."

Which we did.

CHAPTER XVIII

SILAS DOOLITTLE BUGG was sitting on a log outside the mill, looking as if somebody had just told him the executioner was coming along to cut off both his legs with a meat-ax. He was about the most woebegone and sorrowful and downhearted-looking man I ever set eyes on. He drooped all over like a geranium that has been touched by frost. Yes, sir, he looked like all his leaves was going to fall off.

"M-mornin, Silas!" says Mark.

Silas just looked up and nodded and then looked down again. I was afraid he might start in to cry.

"S-somethin' wrong?" says Mark.

"Everythin'," says Silas.

"For instance?" says Mark.

"It hain't no use," says Silas. "We're done for. We're jest naturally up and done for."

"Maybe," says Mark, "but what m-makes you think so?"

"Men's all quit," says Silas.

"Git more."

"Wiggamore hires 'em away as fast as I can."

"We'll see about that. Is that all?"

"All! Why, it hain't even a start."

"What else?"

"Seems like I didn't quite pay for them lathes, and along comes a feller with a chattel mortgage. I clean forgot about it. No sooner does he come along, bringin' a deputy sheriff with him, than another man rushes in and claims our dowel-machine because the feller I bought it off of hadn't ever paid for it, and *he* fetched along another deputy sheriff. Mill's plumb full of sheriffs a-settin' onto machinery."

"How much?" says Mark, without winking an eye. I was in a regular panic, but not him. You would have thought he expected to hear something like this and was ready for it.

"One man wants two hunderd and eighty, the other says he's got a hunderd and seventy-three comin'."

"That m-makes four hunderd and f-f-fifty-three dollars," says Mark.

"And that hain't all. The factory inspector's there, and he says we can't run another day till we build outside fire-escapes from the second and third floors made out of iron. Hain't got no idee *what* that 'll cost, but plenty."

"Um! . . . That all?"

"Hain't it enough?"

"Suits me," says Mark, "but b-b-before I start to work cleanin' it up I want to be sure it's

all out. I don't want nothin' else p-poppin' up when this is done."

"You goin' to try to fix this up?" says Silas, looking as astonished as if an angle-worm had looked up in his face and invited him to dinner.

"Hain't g-goin' to *try*," says Mark. "I'm goin' to d-do it."

"Well," says Silas, "I guess that's about all. I can't think of nothin' else."

"Thank goodness for that," says I.

"P-probably take clost to a thousand dollars," says Mark, mentioning a thousand dollars as if all he had to do was to reach into his pants pocket and haul it out.

"The sheriffs say they're goin' to take that machinery out of here in twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours, eh? Well, that's quite a while, hain't it? A f-feller kin do quite a lot in twenty-four hours if he hustles. . . . Now, Silas, you sit still on that log and enjoy bein' m-m-miserable. That's all I ask of you. Don't do anythin', because if you do you'll git us into more t-trouble. Jest sit and think. Don't talk to nobody and don't sign anythin' and don't do anythin'. Us fellers 'll hustle around."

"All right," says Silas, "but it hain't no use."

"If you git p-pleasure out of thinkin' so," says Mark, "why, go ahead. I feel d-different."

Mark started to walk off, and we followed him.

"Where you goin'?" says I.

"See a lawyer," says he.

"What for?"

"Find out about them f-fire-escapes."

Well, we went to a lawyer and told him, and he says the law wasn't made to apply to cases such as ours, but that a factory inspector that was mean and crooked might make it twist around so as to make us trouble. He says that, anyhow, the factory inspector could shut us down for a spell till we fought it out, and fighting it out would be expensive.

"All right," says Mark. "It's Wiggamore b-behind all this. He's got money and influence, and he's fixed this all up. If we kin settle Wiggamore, we kin settle the whole thing. Let's forgit about the f-f-fire-escapes and look into gittin' money to satisfy them other claims."

"'Most five hunderd dollars," says I.

"That hain't as bad as if it was f-f-five thousand," says Mark.

Now wasn't that just like him? Nothin' was so bad in his eyes but what it could be a whole lot worse, and he always managed to look on the bright side. Not that he was given much to thinking things was easier and safer than they was, but he always let on that he could do what he had to and was thankful it wasn't a lot more.

"Where'll we git that money?"

"T-try the bank," says he.

Well, we did that, but the president of the bank said he had helped us all he could. He would loan money on our bills of lading, but he couldn't do any more. He wouldn't take a mortgage on the mill, and he wouldn't lend any other way. That was all there was to it. Mark thanked him for giving us his time, just like we had got what we wanted. He acted like that man had done him a favor, and out we went.

"Well?" says I.

"Didn't expect m-much to git it there," says he.

"Where do you expect to git it?"

"Don't know. Got to t-t-think."

"Then do it quick," says I. "Time's flyin'."

"'Tain't no use to try to b-borrow," says he. "And if we did that's jest p-puttin' off trouble. We'd have to pay sometime. If we got to p-pay sometime, we might as well pay now."

"Sure," says I, sarcastic as vinegar. "That's the way I feel. You jest hand me the money and I'll run down and pay it."

"Plunk," says he, "the only part of your head that's alive is your l-l-lower jaw. If you can't help, don't hinder." Then he looked at me and grinned and says: "Now I hadn't ought to have spoke that way, but I was worried and bothered and it jest s-slipped out. I know you're helpin' all you kin, and will be right there to

back me up in the p-pinch. You hain't mad about what I said, be you?"

Well, I was a mite hot, but what was a fellow to do when he spoke that way? It was my fault, anyhow, and I see that right off.

"Course I hain't," says I. "I got what was comin' to me. I'll shut up and obey orders."

"Let's see," says he, "how does f-folks raise money? They b-borrow it or sell somethin' and git it, or have it given to 'em—or else they hustle around and *m-make* it. We can't borrow. We hain't got n-nothin' to sell, and nobody's goin' to give it to us. The only way l-left is to m-make it. That's what we got to study over."

"Five hunderd dollars in twenty-four hours!" says Binney.

"I've read about men that's m-made a million in less time," says Mark.

Well, we started back to the mill, and who should we meet right in front of the hotel but Wiggamore himself. He looked at us like he didn't know us and was passing on, but Mark stopped and went right up to him.

"Mornin', Mr. Wiggamore," says he.

"Good morning," says Mr. Wiggamore.

"Don't you know me?" says Mark, soft and gentle like.

"Can't say I do," says Wiggamore, but you could tell by his eyes that he did.

"I'm Mark Tidd, and these other fellers is

with me runnin' Silas Doolittle Bugg's mill. I guess m-maybe you remember talkin' to me about buyin' our dam."

"Oh yes!" says Wiggamore, making like he was surprised. "So I did. You wouldn't sell, I remember."

"Not at your f-figger."

"Too bad. Well, if you want to talk about selling now, it's too late. I don't want to buy."

"So I judged," says Mark, "but I sort of f-f-figgered it was square to give you another chance. I b-believe in doin' business fair and square. That dam is valuable to you. You've got to have it. It is worth a lot of m-money to you, and we'll consider a reasonable offer."

"I wouldn't offer you a cent," says Wiggamore.

"Don't you want our dam?"

"Yes, but I'm through monkeying with you. I'm not throwing money away. You wouldn't sell, and so I washed my hands of you. If you get your fingers burnt, why, it's your own fault. You can't get in the way of a big enterprise like mine. You did and I'm going to kick you out of the way. That's all."

"How would you l-like to be in our place?"

"I'm not, so I can't say."

"And you f-f-figger you got us beat? That's it? You think you got us l-licked with your factory inspectors, and your chattel m-mort-

gages, and hirin' our men away from us so we can't run. You sort of calc'late to git our dam for n-nothin'."

"Oh, not as cheaply as that!"

"Mr. Wiggamore, I'm givin' you one more chance. I've played fair with you, and so have all of us. Will you play f-fair with us?"

"I won't have anything to do with you. That dam is mine, or will be in a couple of days. You might as well give up gracefully now. How do you figure you can do anything—a crowd of boys without a cent—against the Power Company? You were beaten before you started."

"We f-figgered on one thing," says Mark, sort of slow. "We figgered that as big a man as you be wouldn't stoop to cheat and scheme and bulldoze jest to s-s-save a few dollars. We f-figgered that real business men did business honest and aboveboard. We figgered that somewheres in your big company was men that wouldn't stand by to git rich by gougin' other folks out of money they'd worked hard and honest to earn. That's how we l-looked at it. But I guess we was wrong."

"Don't talk to me like that, boy," says Wiggamore.

"I jest got a couple m-more words to say, and I'm goin' to say 'em. I know all big b-business men hain't like you. I know most of 'em is honest and fair. Jest because we run acrost a

man like you don't make us think they're all like you. What it makes us think is that if them other m-men knew how you acted to us they'd be ashamed of you. They wouldn't want to have anythin' to do with you. They wouldn't do business with you. . . . The more I think about it the more it gits into my head that you hain't a real business man at all. You're jest a feller that's got up in the world because he was willin' to do dirty things that other men wouldn't touch. . . . Sich men don't last. Maybe you kin git ahead for a while, but it's only for a while. I jest wanted to let you know what we think of you, and to tell you this: We was willin' to be reasonable. We was w-willin' to come to t-terms. Now you can't make no t-terms with us. It's f-fight. We'll git all we kin. We'll make you pay the l-last cent we kin git out of you—and you'll pay it, too. That's all, Mr. Wiggamore, and good m-mornin'."

He turned his back and walked off fast. I looked back, and Wiggamore was looking after him with a queer kind of a look that was more than half mad, but mixed with something else that I couldn't quite make out. Anyhow, says I to myself, whatever happens, we got the satisfaction of knowing that man hain't mistaken about what we think of him.

"Now what?" says I to Mark.

"Fight," says he. "I hain't n-never been in no fight before. This hain't no reg'lar fight, it's between Wiggamore and us. What I'm goin' to f-find out is this—if business will stand for sich men as Wiggamore. That's what I'm goin' to f-find out."

"How?" says I.

"When there's a war," says Mark, "the thing to do is to capture the enemy's strongest p-place —the place that's d-defendin' all his country. Do that and you win. I'm g-goin' to try to capture Wiggamore's stronghold."

"Don't sound jest clear to me," says I.

"It will," says he, "b-because you're goin' to help me, and so are Tallow and B-Binney."

"Where's this here fort?"

"In the city," says he.

"We're goin' there?"

"Horse, f-foot, and artillery," says he.

"When?"

"First t-train."

"That's one o'clock."

"Yes. All git ready. Be at the depot. Now h-hustle."

"We'll be there," says I, and so did Tallow and Binney.

You bet we'd be there. Nothing short of an earthquake helped out by a cyclone and a hurricane and a ton of dynamite could have kept us away, for we knew something big was

going to happen. Mark Tidd was mad. He was mad all the way through, like I had never seen him before, and he was going after a bigger fight than he had ever been in. I wouldn't have missed seeing it to be invited to dinner by the President.

"It hain't l-like this was jest *our* fight," says he. "It's everybody's f-fight. If real big b-business men will stand for doin's like Wiggamore's I want to know it. The mill and our b-business is little and don't amount to m-much. We're goin' to f-f-fight for somethin' bigger. It's what folks call the p-principle."

"Jest so it's a fight," says I, "I don't care if it's for a bag of peanuts."

"You would if you t-thought about it," says he, sort of solemn. And when I got home I did think about it, and somehow I come to see that he was right and that fighting for a principle is about the biggest thing a fellow can do. . . . Only, he wants to be sure he's got a regular principle to fight for.

CHAPTER XIX

YOU can bet we all caught the one-o'clock train, and we enjoyed the ride to the city, for all that we were going on such important business, and for all of the fact that none of us had the least idea in the world what we were going to do but Mark. He knew. You could tell by the way he acted that he knew exactly, and was going to do it or bust. There was just one surprise, and that was that Amassa P. Wiggamore got on the same train. He didn't see us, because he rode in the parlor-car and we rode in the regular coach. Mark said he judged we'd see more of him before we got back home again. We did.

When we got to the city we went to the hotel we knew about and got two rooms, and then we had supper and walked around a little, looking in windows and at folks on the street, and had a bully time. Mark set a record for eating peanuts. He got away with three bags between seven o'clock and nine, when we went to bed, and they were good big bags, too. Each of us ate a bag, but he said it was his duty to eat

just as much as we did, so he had to have one for each of us.

He woke us up in the morning, and saw to it that when we dressed we fixed up special and neat, because he let on that when you were going to see big business men it made a heap of difference how you looked and whether they got a good impression of you right off. He made me tie my tie three times, and Binney had to comb his hair over, and Tallow had to shine up his shoes. I got kind of scared on account of making such preparations as that. I tell you things are pretty serious when a fellow has to be as fussy as Mark seemed to be.

Anyhow, he got us dressed to suit him, and then we had breakfast, and then we started out to an address that Mark had found out before he left Wicksville. We walked, and it was quite a ways, but we knew there wasn't any use getting there too early. Our experience with the railroad men proved that. We figured we would get there about nine o'clock, which we did. But that was too early, so we went for another walk and got back at ten.

Then we went up in the elevator to the tenth floor and got off, and Mark led us along till we came to a door that said Middle-West Power Company on it, and he turned the knob and walked right in as bold as brass. I went right behind him, though I didn't want to much, for

I sort of figured we'd get thrown out faster than we went in. But we didn't.

There was a young lady at a desk and Mark asked her if the president was in.

"President James is in a meeting of the board of directors," she said, as courteous as could be. "He'll be busy some time. Can I do anything?"

"Board of directors of the P-Power Company?"

"Yes."

"Better l-luck than I expected," says Mark. "We want to see all of that b-board of directors. How kin we m-manage it?"

"Why," says she, "I'm afraid you can't manage it! They're pretty busy, you know."

"This is important—to t-t-them," says Mark. "It's about their dam and p-p-power-plant to Wicksville. We own the dam and there's other things we're mixed up in. We just *got* to get to see them."

"I wouldn't dare let you in," says she.

"Suppose you just l-l-look the other way, and we'll walk in, anyhow," says Mark.

"I couldn't do that," she says.

"No," says Mark, "I s'pose it wouldn't be right."

And just then in walks Wiggamore!

He gave one look at us and scowled. Then he marched right over to us and says, as savage as a mean watch-dog, "Git out of here!"

"Not to-day," says Mark. "We're here on business."

"Git out before I throw you out," says Wiggamore. He raised his voice so it was pretty loud, and Mark spoke back to him just a little louder, and afterward I found out he did it on purpose. He wanted to be heard, because he figured that was about the only way he would get into the board meeting.

"I'm here on b-b-business with President James," he said, "and I'm going to stay. You won't t-throw us out, Mr. Wiggamore, and you hadn't better try. You looked for trouble, and we're here with it, and we're goin' to see President James and don't you forget it." He lifted his voice a little louder and almost hollered, "President James is the m-man we got to see, and if he knew about the p-papers I got in my pocket he'd see us mighty quick."

"Hush!" says Wiggamore. "Don't yell so in here."

Just then a door opened and a great big man with shoulders as broad as a house, and with white hair and a white mustache, and a face that looked like it was carved out of a rock, but that you kind of took a liking to right off, looked out. He looked cross. When I say you took a liking to him, I don't mean that exactly. I mean you felt a kind of a respect for him. That's the way he looked.

"Here, here!" says he. "What's all this disturbance?"

"These boys," says Wiggamore. "I can't get rid of them."

"So it seems, Wiggamore. What ails 'em?"

"They want to see you, sir," said the young woman. "The noise really wasn't their fault."

"It wasn't, eh? Did you tell them I was in a board meeting?"

"Yes, and then they wanted to see the whole board. They come from Wicksville."

At that President James shot a kind of a look at us and stepped a little closer.

"What about Wicksville?" says he.

Wiggamore interrupted. "These kids," says he, "have been making a pest of themselves there. I don't know why they came here, but I'll 'tend to them. I'll see they don't disturb you any more."

"Um! . . . Four boys don't come 'way to the city from Wicksville and try to break into a board meeting without there's something back of it. We've been talking about that Wicksville situation this morning, and if these boys can clear it up any I'd like to talk to them. As for me, I don't understand it."

"We kin clear it up a l-l-lot," says Mark. "Just take us into that meeting and l-l-let us tell you."

"It's nonsense," says Wiggamore. "It's some kind of a kid practical joke."

"Kids don't joke like this," says President James. "Come in, all of you. If there's nothing to it we won't waste a great deal of time finding it out."

So in we went, and there were six men sitting around a table, looking sour and impatient, and every one of them gave us a scowl as we came in. Wiggamore came along.

"Gentlemen," says President James, "here are four boys from Wicksville—and Mr. Wiggamore. Maybe between them we can get some satisfactory idea of what is happening there."

"What have a crowd of kids to do with it?" said a fat man.

"I'm sure I don't know. Best way to find out is to ask 'em," says President James. "What are you here for, boys?"

"To fight," says Mark, just like that.

"Fight, eh? What for?"

"First for the p-p-principle of the thing, and then for our rights," says Mark.

"What principle, son?"

"Decent b-b-business," says Mark.

"Um! . . . Decent business! What's your name, young man? And why do you mention a principle ahead of your rights?"

"My name's Mark Tidd—Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, and these f-f-fellers are Tallow Martin, Plunk Smalley, and Binney Jenks. We put p-p-principle first because it looks to us like

it was consid'able more important to see everything in the world done square than just to see one little thing that concerns us done square."

The men around the table kind of leaned forward and looked at Mark close and interested.

"Go ahead," says President James.

"I protest," says Wiggamore. "These boys have got in my way, and they're here with lying stories about me. I protest against wasting our time with a lot of kids."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," says President James. "It looks like they had something to say, and I'm for listening to them. This Mark Tidd made an interesting start."

"Let 'em go ahead," says the fat director, and he nodded to Mark.

"Well," says Mark, slow and careful and sort of hand-picking every word to get a good sound one without wormholes in it, "well, we got it into our heads that the Middle-West Power Company must have honest men runnin' it, and that they wouldn't be likely to stand for cheatin' and underhand work. We b-believed that business couldn't go on if that wasn't so, and we come to find out. If it was so, we wanted to show you how things goes on that you don't understand about—that gits b-b-blamed onto you and makes some f-folks think all business men is crooked. That's why we came."

"Go ahead," says President James. "Tell it to us."

"We own the dam and mill in Wicksville," says Mark, "and we and Silas Doolittle Bugg have been runnin' it."

"Mark's been the boss," says I.

"That don't m-matter. Well, we was r-runnin' this mill to get Silas Doolittle out of a hole. He didn't know anythin' about b-business, so we took holt, and things was goin' perty good till Mr. Wiggamore come to town and wanted to git our dam. He come into the mill and wanted we should give it to him. That was about it. And when we wouldn't do that, he started in to threaten us and to tell us he would t-t-take the dam away from us anyhow. . . . That's what he's been t-t-tryin' to do. Here's a few of the things he's done, that we kin p-p-prove. He hired a man to damage our m-machinery. He t-t-tried to buy up some debts of ours to use 'em to s-shut down the mill. He's hired our men away so we couldn't run. He's managed to get the f-f-factory inspector to close us down when there wasn't right or reason to it, and he's found a couple of chattel m-mortgages on machinery that Silas Doolittle forgot to tell us about, and deputy sheriffs are in the mill now. That's only a p-part. He wouldn't make us a f-f-fair offer, and he wouldn't talk business. He wanted to gouge us out of our mill.

That's the whole thing, and we kin p-p-prove it."

"Um!" says President James.

"It isn't true," says Wiggamore. "I've done none of those things. These boys wanted the earth for their broken-down dam, and I couldn't stand for it. I knew you gentlemen wanted this thing done cheaply and quickly, and I've been doing my best. They wanted some silly sum of money, and I wouldn't listen to them."

"So you told us. What did you want, young men?"

"Here's our p-p-pickle," says Mark. "We own that m-m-mill and dam. The mill hain't worth a cent with the dam gone. We said Mr. Wiggamore ought to buy the m-mill, too, at a reasonable price, and he wouldn't l-listen. I guess he'd *rather* do things crooked than straight."

"Wiggamore hasn't done anything," the fat man whispered to the man next him. "That dam is vital and the site for the power-house below it is vital. He hasn't got results either place."

"So," says Mark, "we come here to f-f-fight. We know what we're entitled to and we're goin' to git it."

"In ten days, gentlemen," says Wiggamore, "I can promise you the dam at a cost of only a few hundred dollars."

"You can *not*," says Mark.

"The mill is bankrupt. It is closed down now never to open again."

"You did that," says Mark, "but it will open again, and it will s-s-stay open, and you won't n-never git our dam till we say so. We're here to l-listen to any fair offer. But we're in a p-p-position to m-make demands, and if we're f-forced, why, we'll make 'em!"

"Say, Wiggamore, you tell us we can have the dam in ten days, but how about the site for the power-house?"

"That is owned by a deaf old maid and her brother that is a fugitive from justice for stealing a hog. She won't talk business without him, and he can't be found. I've had men looking for him, but we can't locate him. That is a trifling matter, and will be straightened up the minute George Piggins is found."

"Um! . . ." The fat man turned to Mark and says: "You say you are in a position to force us to your terms if you want to. That sounds like talking pretty big, for a kid. What do you mean by it?"

"I mean just this, sir, that if I'm wrong about you men, and you aren't b-big and square and honest like I think, why, I'm g-goin' to git all I kin out of you, and I've got a way to do it!"

President James looked at Mark mighty interested, and sort of smiled to himself, and says:

"Mark Tidd, for the minute make believe we are a pack of dirty business men. What can you do to us?"

"Bust up your whole p-p-power development on that river or m-make you pay what I ask."

"How?"

"Why," says Mark, "I've f-found George Piggins, and I've got a l-legal option to your p-power site signed by him and his sister. You can go ahead with b-bustin' our mill, and you kin t-take our dam, but we got your power site. That's how I'll do what I said."

Every man there turned like their heads was all connected, to look at Wiggamore, and Wiggamore looked at Mark like he was seeing a ghost.

"I don't believe it," says he.

"I don't ask you to," says Mark.

"Have you that option with you, Mark?" says President James.

"Yes, sir."

"Will you let me see it? Can you trust me that much?"

"Certainly, sir. I haven't had any doubt from the m-m-minute I saw you."

"Thank you," says President James, and Mark handed him the option. He read it careful and passed it along to the others. Then he turned to Wiggamore, and his face was set and stern.

"So this is the way you've been working?" says he. "We hire you to do a job, and you go out and create a situation like this. You stoop to trickery and meanness, and let a whole community get the idea that you have our support and countenance in such ways. I have suspected it. I've suspected it in other cases—but I shall never have to worry about you again. You are through with us, Mr. Wiggamore. The Middle-West Power Company employs decent men only. I'm ashamed to have been associated with you. I'm ashamed of what people must think of me, of what you have made people think of me. . . . It doesn't pay, Mr. Wiggamore. Here you have been tricky and crooked, and you have been beaten, and beaten badly by a boy. He has *done* you. Besides being a trickster and a disgrace to decent business, you are incompetent. Your connection with this company is severed from this instant. Good day, sir."

"He means you're fired, Wiggamore," said the fat man, "and with the approval of the whole board. Now get. You're lucky to get off as easy as you are. If I had my way—"

But Wiggamore was gone. He turned and almost ran out of the room, and that was the last we ever saw of him.

CHAPTER XX

WELL, you could have knocked me down with a straw. I wouldn't have believed it, and I wouldn't have believed it if somebody had told me those big business men would all get up and come over and shake hands with us four boys and say such things to us as they did. I was doggone embarrassed, but not Mark. He *liked* it. Not that he was ever swell-headed, but he did love to be praised, and this time he was getting a whole armful of it. Pretty soon they all settled down again, and President James says, "Now what terms can we make with you? You've got us down. What does it cost us?"

"We just want what is f-f-fair," says Mark.

"Um! . . . Let's see. Now suppose that you let us talk it over while you step into the next room. We'll call you back in a few minutes and make an offer to you. How's that?"

"Fine, sir," says Mark, and out we went. We sat around there for twenty minutes, and then President James opened the door and asked us to come in again.

"We've talked it over," said he, "and have

decided to make you this offer. If you will transfer to us your dam and the site of your mill, and the Piggins land you hold under option, we will, in return, build you a new mill below the dam, remove and set up your machinery, reimburse you for loss of profits during the time the changes are being made, and give you three thousand dollars in cash. How is that?"

"It's all right," said Mark, "except that we wouldn't have any p-p-power to run the mill."

"Didn't I tell you?" said President James to the fat man. "I said he was sharp enough to see that. You said he wouldn't notice. . . . We left that out on purpose," said he, "just to see. . . . You came up to expectations. Well, on that point, we will furnish you power free for a period of ten years, after that you are to pay for it at a reasonable rate."

"We accept," says Mark.

"Good. We will have the proper papers drawn—"

"And meantime," says the fat director, "I want to see whether that Tidd boy can eat as much as I can. I'm going to invite the lot of you to dinner to watch the contest, and, believe me, friends, it is going to be some spectacle. It starts as soon as we can get to the best place to eat in town."

Everybody got up and we went out, and that

fat man bought us a dinner that I sha'n't ever forget, and I bet Mark won't either. I didn't know there was such grub in the world, and I ate till I 'most exploded. But Mark—well, you should have seen it. Him and that fat man had hardly started when we commenced, and they kept on for an hour, with all the rest of those directors laughing and urging them just as if it was a baseball game. It ended up with the fat director laying back in his chair, panting, and with Mark finishing up a thing they called a French pastry and asking if he couldn't have a couple more. Yes, sir, he beat that man by three French pastries, and was declared to be the champion eater of Michigan.

They were all mighty good to us, and we were kind of sorry to go home. They took us to the theater, and wanted us to stay another day, but we thought we'd better get back to work, so we left on the midnight train and got to Wicksville the next morning.

We went right to the mill, and there was Silas Doolittle Bugg sitting on the same log, looking sadder than he did when we saw him last. I don't know whether he had sat there right along, or whether he went home to sleep and for meals. I never found out.

"Mornin', Silas," says Mark.

"Mornin'," says Silas, mournful and glum.

"Mill hain't runnin' yet?"

"How could it? It hain't n-never goin' to run no more."

"You're right, Silas, it hain't," says Mark.

"I knowed it."

"But," says Mark, "there's goin' to be a new m-m-mill built right over there, and it 'll be all p-p-paid for, and we're to git three h-hunderd d-dollars a month as a profit beginnin' to-day and l-lastin' till the new mill starts, and we git f-free p-power for ten years, and we git t-t-three thousand d-dollars in cash. That's about all."

"Don't joke with a feller," says Silas. "I'm too played out to joke."

"It hain't no joke," says Mark. "I got the p-p-papers to prove it."

Well, Silas Doolittle wouldn't believe it till Mark showed him the papers, and then took him to a lawyer that told him they were real, and then you ought to have seen him. Happy? Why, you never saw anything like it in your life! He 'most danced a jig. He couldn't say anything for a spell, and then he let out a sort of holler and ran down into the street and started telling everybody he met. In about an hour everybody in Wicksville knew it, and knew how Mark Tidd did it, and you'd better believe that Mark Tidd was considerable of a big person in that town then and there. Everybody wanted to talk to him and ask him about it.

But he didn't grab all the glory. No, sir.

He wasn't that kind of a fellow. He insisted us three fellows had as much to do with it as he did, so we got some praise, too; but we knew, and everybody else knew, that it was Mark Tidd and nobody else. I know I was suited to have it that way.

That night when we parted to go to bed I says to Mark, "I guess this is about the biggest thing you ever done, and I don't see how you done it."

"I do," says he. "It was all h-havin' fellers to help me that would s-s-stick right to it till we got there. We done it b-because we played fair and was right—and b-because we didn't lay down on the job."

"Maybe so," says I, "but brains come into it somewhere, and you're the only one of us that seems like he's got any."

"Fiddlesticks!" says Mark.

THE END